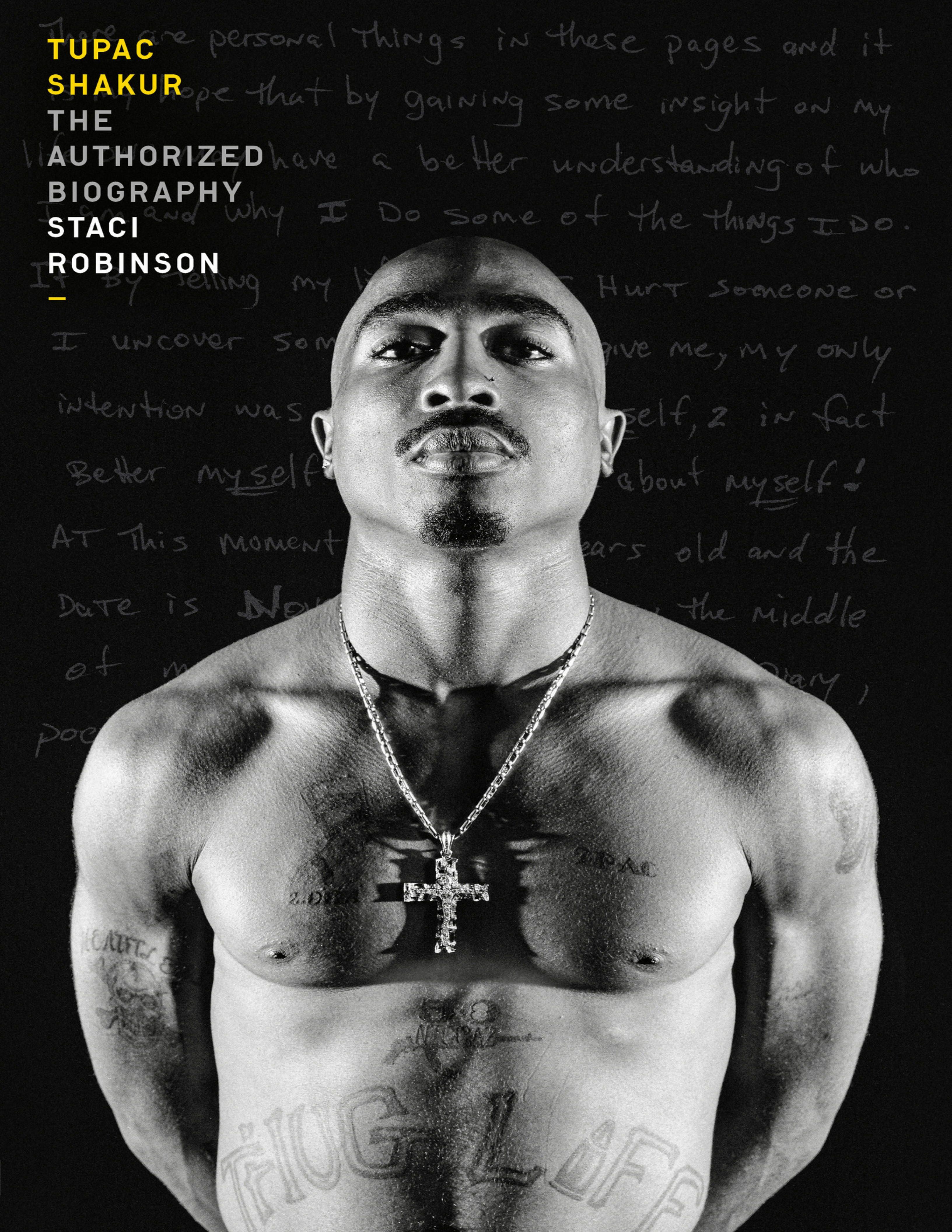
TUPAC SHAKUR

THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY

STACI ROBINSON


There are personal things in these pages and it
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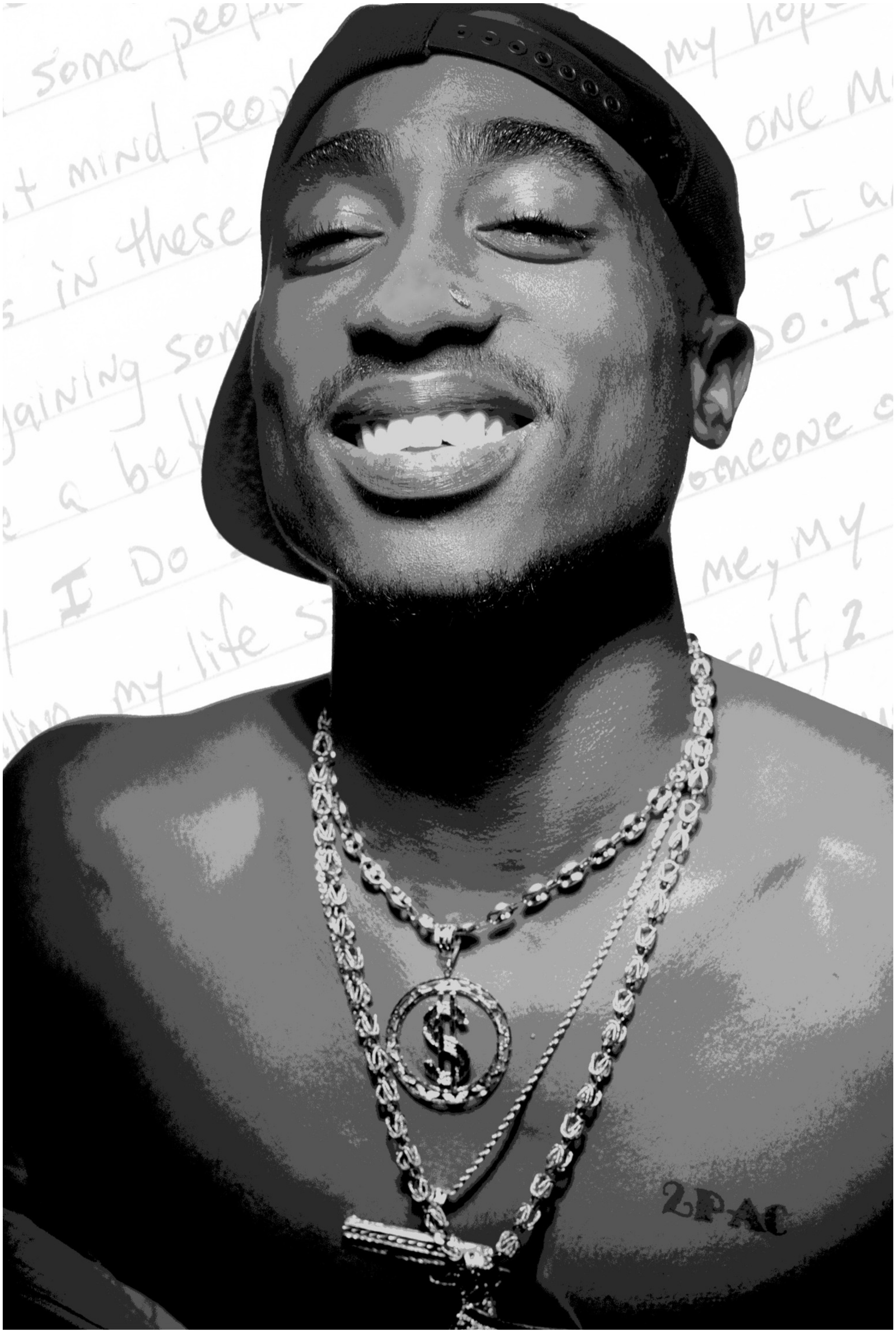
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TUPAC SHAKUR

THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY

Staci Robinson

Crown | New York

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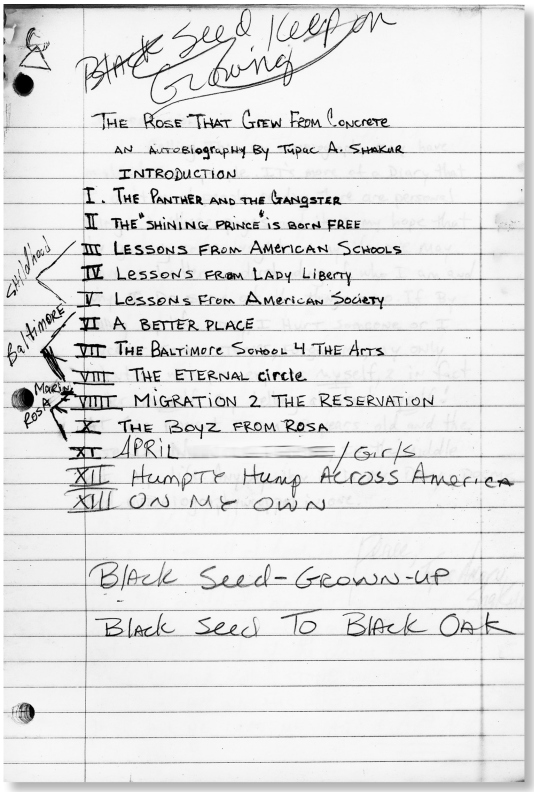

~~BLACK~~ Seed Keep on Growing

THE ROSE THAT GREW FROM CONCRETE

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY TUPAC A. SHAKUR

INTRODUCTION

I. THE PANTHER AND THE GANGSTER
II THE "SHINING PRINCE" IS BORN FREE
III LESSONS FROM AMERICAN SCHOOLS
IV LESSONS FROM LADY LIBERTY
V LESSONS FROM AMERICAN SOCIETY
VI A BETTER PLACE
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VIIII MIGRATION 2 THE RESERVATION
X THE BOYZ FROM ROSA
XI APRIL [redacted] / Girls
XII Humpty Hump Across America
XIII ON MY OWN

Childhood

Baltimore

Marin

ROSA

BLACK Seed-GROWN-UP

Black Seed TO BLACK OAK

The table of contents to Tupac’s autobiography that he started writing in 1989 at the age of eighteen.

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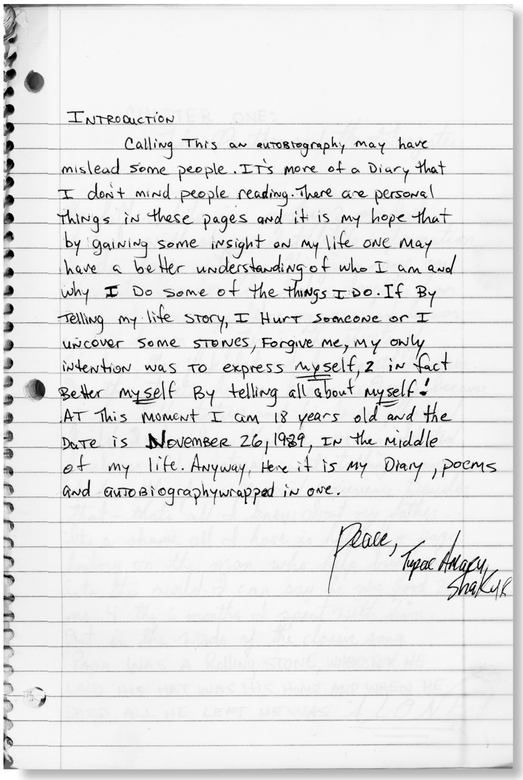

INTRODUCTION

Calling This an autobiography may have mislead some people. IT's more of a Diary that I don't mind people reading. There are personal Things in these pages and it is my hope that by gaining some insight on my life one may have a better understanding of who I am and why I Do some of the things I DO. If By Telling my life story, I Hurt Someone or I uncover some stones, Forgive me, my only intention was to express myself, 2 in fact Better myself By telling all about myself! AT This moment I am 18 years old and the Date is November 26, 1989, In the middle of my life. Anyway, Here it is my Diary, poems and autobiographywrapped in one.

Peace,
Tupac Amaru Shakur

The introduction to Tupac's autobiography that he started writing in 1989 at the age of eighteen.

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INTRO

When I met Tupac, he was only seventeen years old. To me, he was just another friend in our social circle. He and I attended the same high school, Tamalpais High, in the small town of Mill Valley in Northern California, and I'd met him during a trip home from college. In that moment, I would never have guessed I'd just been introduced to someone who would go on to be a cultural icon, a global superstar…or that he'd become the legend that he'd become—except for of course when he told us. Even at that young age, he was confident, certain that he would leave an imprint on society. I think more confident than anyone else I knew.

Months later, after I'd gone back to college in Los Angeles and he had decided that high school was a waste of his time, he called my roommates and me, all of us from Mill Valley, to ask us if he could stay with us for a while and sleep on our couch. "I need to move," he said. At the time, he was anxiously awaiting news of a recording contract from his manager. "My career isn't taking off fast enough," he explained, "and I think I need to be in L.A." A few days later, he showed up at our door with a backpack and blue notebook.

Each day, my roommates and I would leave for school or work while he stayed in our apartment alone writing feverishly in that notebook. When we returned in the late afternoon, he'd want to share with us what he'd written that day. Picture a teenage Tupac, sittin' at our dinner table while we ate our Top Ramen and mac 'n' cheese, rapping about the young Black male, his lyrics filled with purpose, pleading for change.

Looking back on that moment, I realize now that *I didn't know* yet. I listened. I heard him. I appreciated his concerns. But *I didn't know* that I was in the presence of a young man who was on a fearless path to address the inequities in our society in whatever way he could. *I didn't know* because, although I hate to admit it, I wasn't ready to talk about the young Black male and the problems they faced as one of the most vulnerable groups in our population. I wanted to talk about the young Black male in my lecture hall that day and how cute he was. At twenty, I was selfish. At seventeen, Tupac was selfless.

When his manager, Leila Steinberg, found a place for him to stay, he thanked us and was on his way. As he walked out the door that evening, with just his backpack and blue notebook, my roommates and I wished him luck. And it seemed as soon as the door closed behind him, he became a household name.

After I graduated from UCLA, I embarked on my own writing career, writing novels. But I still wasn't yet writing about the young Black male as Tupac was; I was writing about that same young Black male I had met in the lecture hall and the heartbreak that inevitably occurred years later. During the day, I worked in the sports industry as an assistant to professional athletes, the New York Jets number one draft pick Keyshawn Johnson and NBA star Brian Shaw. At night, I'd write.

While at work, I'd often get phone calls from Tupac's assistant. "Tupac keeps asking when you're gonna leave the sports industry and come work for him," she'd say. One afternoon, the request was more specific: "Tupac is forming a writing group. He wants you to join." He had started writing screenplays and was building a team, a group of female writers to ensure that his characters' voices, perspectives, and tones were authentic. I was excited to be a part of that group. We set a meeting for Tuesday, September 10, 1996.

Three days before that meeting, Tupac was shot in Las Vegas. He fought for his life, but ultimately lost the battle, passing away on September 13. That meeting and countless other plans that he had in place would never happen. I, and the rest of the world, had lost a friend. A brother. An uncle. A nephew. A cousin. An inspiration. A leader. A soldier. And Tupac's mother, Afeni Shakur, the woman who taught him everything he knew, who spoke as vehemently as he did about hope and change, lost her only son.

A few years later, Afeni asked me to write her son's life story. For me, her request was met with a mix of emotions. Of course, I was honored. But as I pondered this huge undertaking, I was also fearful. I hadn't been an A student at Tamalpais High School, nor at UCLA. I'd *never* been an A student, and, in my mind, those were the people who went on to write biographies about leaders and figures like Tupac Amaru Shakur. The biographers I knew of had extensive experience as staff writers and editors at newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times,* or contributors for magazines like *The New Yorker*. They were often renowned historians or professors at prestigious institutions. But I was a B student. I wrote stories about love and loss, and screenplays in the silly romantic comedy genre. Why was Afeni asking me?

I learned it was because she trusted me. She believed I could tell her son's life story with integrity and with a fair and balanced perspective. The good and the bad. His struggles and successes. The bloopers and the blemishes. She felt the family would be comfortable sitting down with me to tell stories they had never told before. And most important, just as her son had done, she wanted to give me a chance. Tupac and Afeni were always ones to give a chance to people who might not otherwise get one. Many of Afeni's decisions during those years were made with her son's intentions in mind, and I believe that her asking me to write Tupac's life story was no exception.

So, in 1999, I bought an eMachine personal computer and hunkered down in my apartment in Inglewood with a deadline less than a year away. The first thing I did was create a timeline of Tupac's life from birth to death. I taped the hundred-plus pages to my wall, transforming my apartment into Tupacland. Then I started interviewing. And typing. And interviewing. And typing. And interviewing some more. I flew cross-country and spent days in the Georgia home Tupac purchased for Afeni. I sat in her kitchen while she cooked fried chicken, one of Tupac's favorite meals, as we spent hours talking about his life. At night, we sat on her porch while she chain-smoked, alternating between Newports and weed, talking about *her* life. The more we talked, the more I understood how similar the two of them were. And just as with Tupac, the more I got to know Afeni, the more my admiration grew.

To research the book, I spent hours on the phone with and in the living rooms of Tupac's family members. I shared endless laughter with cousin Jamala, asking her a thousand questions while she jumped on her bed and blasted her favorite music through our chatter. I recorded childhood stories over Italian pastries at Emporio Rulli in Larkspur and laughed with his friends at Pinky's Pizza in San Rafael while listening to the adventures of Tupac learning to drive. I tracked down his teachers, his colleagues, and those he loved. After eight months, endless hours of interviews, and too many late-night editing sessions to count, I turned in the manuscript.

A few weeks later, I was informed that the project would be put "on hold for now." I was disappointed, but when I thought about all the people I'd met and the stories I'd heard, I felt overwhelming gratitude to have been given this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Through my interviews, I had discovered the most intricate and personal details of the life of a friend, one who had come from a rich and honorable family lineage. I knew, if given the chance, I wanted to be any part of the team that would do the work to carry on his legacy. From that moment, I excitedly accepted every opportunity Afeni presented to me.

One day, a few years later, Afeni invited me to come to her houseboat in Sausalito, California. She heard I'd published a novel and she wanted to congratulate me. When I arrived, she handed me a gift, a biography of the great Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston. "Thank you, Afeni," I said, "but I'm a little embarrassed. Because here I am writing about the silliness of love and heartbreak when the Shakurs write about the important things in life." Her response was one that anyone who knew Afeni would expect. She told me that it didn't matter *what* I was writing about. "Just write!"

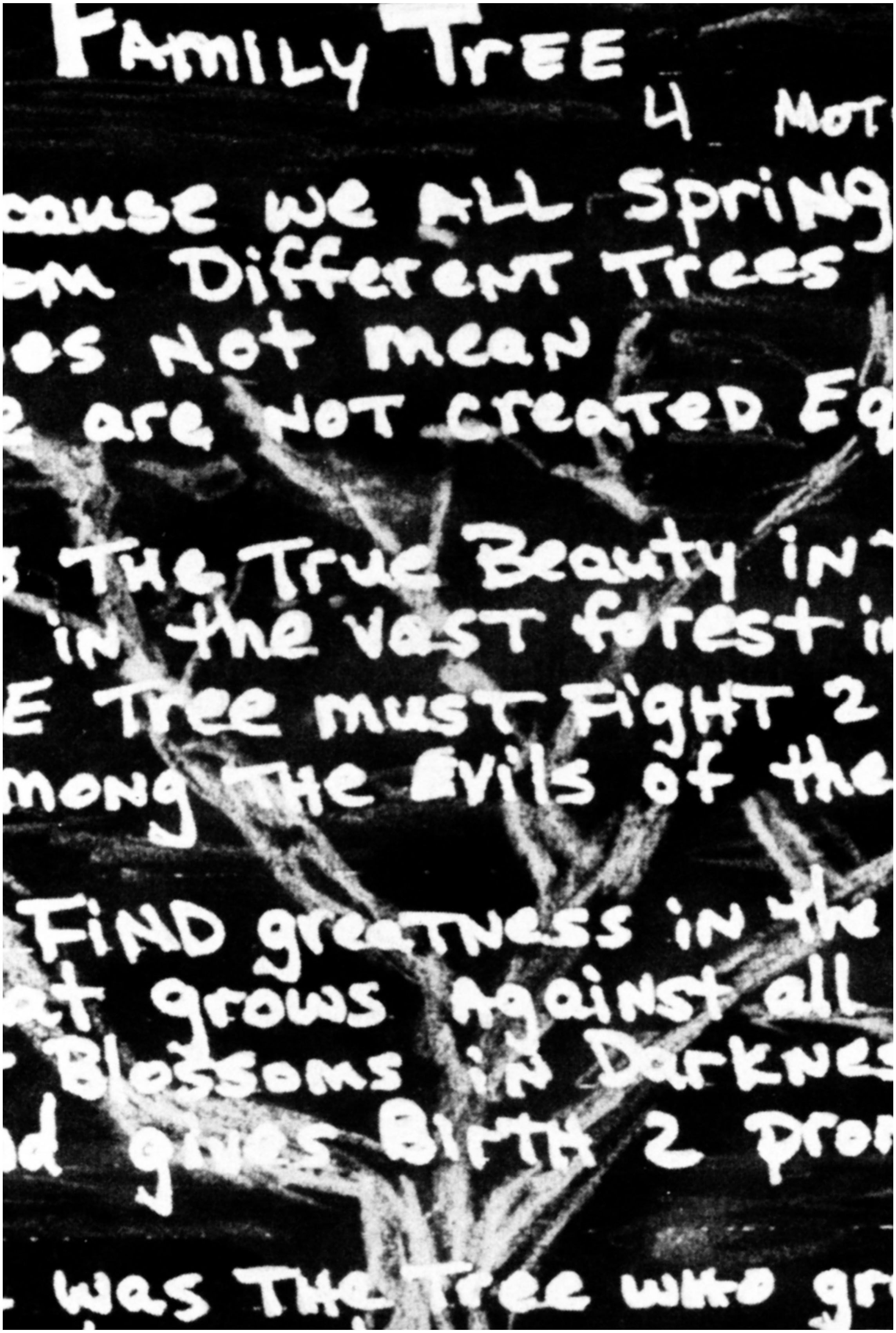
Even during the years that there were no Tupac projects for me to help with, I remained close with Afeni and various members of her family. And when I became a mother, Afeni and her sister, Glo, were there cheering me on from the sidelines. I was grateful that in the final years of her incredible life, she and I ended up living only a few miles apart.

Over the years, I didn't give the manuscript much thought. But in 2017, the lead archivist working on an estate-sanctioned documentary found my name on some of the past projects and asked if I could be hired to assist in story development. Soon after, the Shakur estate embarked on yet another project I was asked to join, a museum exhibit to honor Tupac and his life's work. Two years into the museum project, everything came full circle: I was asked to return to the manuscript I had written so long ago.

As I sit here today, more than two decades later, finishing this book for the second time, with added interviews, new stories, and many, many revisions, I can't help but reflect on what Tuesday, September 10, 1996—the date Tupac had set for our first writers' meeting—might have been like, with all of us getting bossed around by him at his Wilshire House condo. If I close my eyes and think back to those months I spent writing the first draft of this book, I can see Tupacland, those pages of his life events filling the wall in my apartment. I think of that day in 2006 on Afeni's houseboat, when I was questioning my own path, and how I felt empowered as I heard Afeni's voice, filled with conviction, her eyes squinted as she looked at me to say, "It doesn't matter what you write. *Just write!*"

When Afeni Shakur tells you to do something, you better do it.

—Staci Robinson, 2023



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PART I

NEW YORK

01

CRADLE TO THE GRAVE

1970–1971

> June 16, 1971, Mama gave birth to a hell raisin' heavenly son.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

In the predawn hour of April 2, 1969, Afeni Shakur and her husband, Lumumba, lay asleep in their apartment on 112 West 117th Street in Harlem. A hard, almost violent pounding on the front door woke them. Five cops, including Detective Francis Dalton from the New York Police Department, stood outside. Dalton, armed and strapped in a bulletproof vest, lit a rag on fire.

The officers yelled, "Fire! Open the door! Get out! Fire, Fire!"

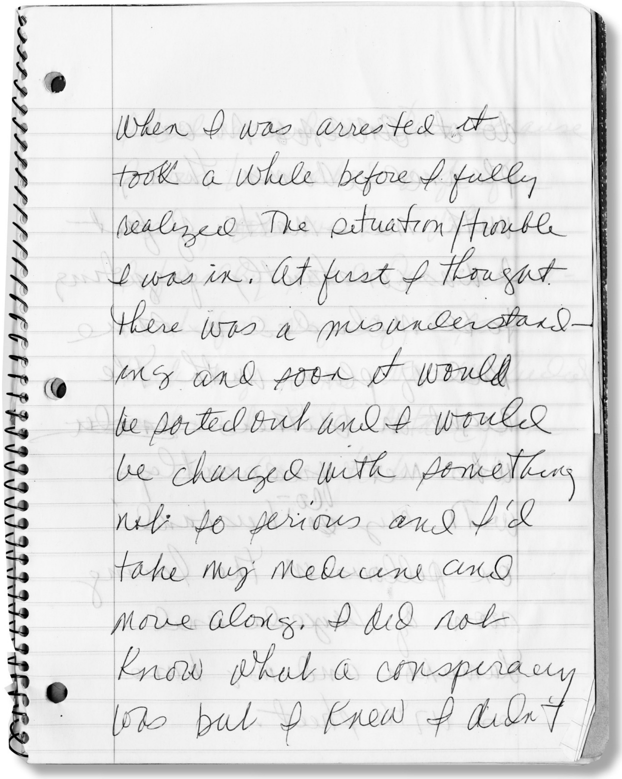
Afeni, with her petite frame, smooth brown skin, and tiny, neat afro, woke to the noise. Still groggy, she followed Lumumba through the darkness and warily stumbled toward the front door. She looked through the peephole and saw smoke. As section leaders for the New York branch of the Black Panther Party, an organization that had for the past two years been under siege by the U.S. government, they were alarmed but also highly suspicious. They feared it was a setup.

Lumumba unlocked and cracked the door, Afeni close by his side. Quickly, the door swung in on them. Visions of men with guns flashed before their eyes. One gun shoved to Afeni's stomach, another to Lumumba's forehead.

"Police! If you move, I'll blow your fuckin' brains open!"

Afeni and Lumumba surrendered. Handcuffed, they were hustled outside to the waiting police car and taken to the District Attorney's Office, where they were booked and processed. As more members of the Black Panthers arrived at the office, handcuffed and perplexed, Afeni tried to make sense of what was happening. She soon learned that men she had trusted, who had stood beside her as Black Panther comrades and taken oaths of solidarity, vowing to fight for social justice, were actually undercover cops and instrumental in the arrests. One man in particular, Yedwa Sutan, whom she had questioned and tried to warn her fellow Panthers about, she learned was police officer Detective Ralph White, validating Afeni's suspicions and marking the beginning of what would become a lifelong "trust nobody" mentality.

White and the other arresting officers were the NYPD's Bureau of Special Services and Investigations Unit, known as BOSSI, a decades-old undercover intelligence operation that worked in conjunction with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). The program was a clandestine effort to spy on and infiltrate "disruptors" of American society. Hoover considered the Black Panther Party a "subversive" group, publicly declaring them "the greatest threat to the internal security of the United States of America" and claiming they would be extinguished by the end of that year. He released aggressive directives that included the use of informants to work undercover operations and neutralize Panther leaders in order to prevent the spread of their "radical" teachings. He vowed to break up all efforts at solidarity with regard to the ideologies of Black nationalism, to prevent the rise of a "Black Messiah who could unify and electrify," and to prevent Black leaders "from gaining respectability by discrediting them." By 1969, hundreds of Black Panther members across the country had been targeted and arrested.



When I was arrested it
took a while before I fully
realized the situation/trouble
I was in. At first I thought
there was a misunderstand-
ing and soon it would
be sorted out and I would
be charged with something
not so serious and I'd
take my medicine and
move along. I did not
know what a conspiracy
was but I knew I didn't

A page from Afeni's autobiography in progress. In it she documents her memories from childhood, her days on trial with the Panther 21, and time spent in the Women's House of Detention.

Click here to view as text

Out of the twenty-one Panthers targeted in this particular raid, Afeni, Lumumba, and ten others (plus two who were already in jail and four who were arrested later) were booked and indicted on charges of conspiracy to blow up a commuter railroad's right-of-way, the Bronx Botanical Gardens, and five department stores: Abercrombie & Fitch, Macy's, Alexander's, Korvette's, and Bloomingdale's. All were New York landmarks and symbols of American capitalism. That afternoon the Panthers were shuffled off to eight different jails in New York and neighboring states, where they would await one of the most significant trials in African American legal history: *The People of the State of New York v. Lumumba Shakur et al.,* which became widely known as the Trial of the Panther 21.

—

Arriving into the tumult of a postwar America still suffering under Jim Crow, Afeni, born Alice Faye Williams, was ushered into the world on January 10, 1947. That year would see the dawn of the Cold War and the establishment of the CIA. It also saw the unveiling of America's first Polaroid camera. Tupperware was invented, and a loaf of bread cost twelve cents. And even as Jackie Robinson took the field as a Brooklyn Dodger, becoming the first African American to step onto a professional baseball field, the Ku Klux Klan ruled much of the Southern landscape. Delivered at home with the help of a midwife, Afeni was welcomed by her mother, Rosa Belle; father, Walter Williams, Jr.; and two-year-old sister, Gloria Jean, who mostly went by her middle name.

By the time Alice Faye was a mere six years old, life had already handed down to her the fundamental lessons of being Black in America. Alice and her sister walked to school each morning, down the dusty roads of Lumberton, North Carolina, enduring name-calling from white men driving by, slowing down long enough to bark hate-filled words at them. Some days it was "monkey." Some days it was "bald-headed, skinny tar baby." But most days it was "nigger." Morning after morning, these words shot straight into young Alice's psyche like daggers, proving that the effects of hate can cut deeper than a bullet or a knife.

In 1954, when Alice was seven years old, the Supreme Court landmark ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* swept through America like a quiet storm. Another step toward equality, but the world knew Black Americans —and more specifically Black students—would be met with violent backlash. In North Carolina, the Ku Klux Klan responded by rallying their forces around their message of hate. They sought to terrorize both Black and indigenous communities in the South, posting flyers, burning crosses, and lynching innocent people to discourage race mixing and to intimidate Blacks and Native tribes against continuing their quest for civil rights.

As the years passed, the Klan's terrorist threats moved closer to the Williams home. In January 1958, news reached Lumberton that a Klan rally was planned in the nearby town of Maxton. The organization's grand dragon, James W. "Catfish" Cole, was leading the charge, making it known that his primary goal was to “put Indians in their place and to end race-mixing” once and for all.

The night of January 18, over five hundred Lumbee warriors showed up in Maxton with guns and rifles, ready to defend themselves, overwhelming the fifty or so Klansmen who came for the rally. Shots were fired into the darkness, local police showed up, and the Ku Klux Klan bolted away into the dark night.

They never returned to Lumberton or Maxton again. Even before Alice Faye Williams was a Shakur, resistance and bold defiance was no abstraction to the Williams family.

But what came to be known as the Battle of Hayes Pond may very well have been the life event that shifted Alice into a new consciousness. The news sparked Alice’s emotions and allowed her to see that you didn’t always have to lie down in the face of attempted oppression. Through the Lumbee warriors’ victory, she learned at eleven years old that it was possible to say no—to stand up against unfair treatment. “That was my first taste of *resistance,*” she would recall forty-five years later. “Resistance is what I felt. *Resist*. A sense of ‘don’t let that happen to you.’ ”

Alice also saw her mother resist after suffering years of domestic violence. “When I used to come home from school, first and second grade, I would look under the bed to make sure [my father] hadn’t killed my mother and stuffed her body under there,” she recalled. But in 1959, Rosa Belle left her husband and moved her girls “up the road” to New York City. In doing so, they took part—along with 6 million other African Americans over the course of a sixty-year time span—in what came to be known as the Great Migration, a search for a life away from the rampant lynchings and social terror that plagued the lives of Black Americans in Southern states. Lured by the promise of a society that might offer a path to truly equal economic opportunity, Rosa Belle was hopeful. She found a room for the three of them to share in a white woman’s apartment on Brook Avenue in the Bronx.

But Alice Faye quickly discovered that the North wasn’t what she had hoped for. From the moment she stepped foot onto her new school campus, the name-calling resumed. When one schoolmate said she looked like something from outer space, she *resisted* in the way she knew how. “I kicked his ass,” she recalled. “All I wanted to do is fight. Fight back…I thought fighting was the way to compensate for my inadequacies.”

She showed promise when in the eighth grade, she was encouraged by her school counselor to apply to New York’s premier High School of Performing Arts School, informally known as PA. She got in, but her experience at PA established the hard reality that some people had more access to opportunity than others, simply because of the color of their skin. “A lot of the kids that went to PA were coming out of private schools,” she recalled. “They came to school in limos, and I hated them with a passion. I’d get high off Thunderbird wine before school even started just to deal with my hatred of them.”

The unfairness fueled her anger, but she had no outlet for it. Her short fuse paved the way to drinking and drug use as she fought her way through New York. She fought boys and girls alike. Ultimately, Alice dropped out of PA and soon after joined the Disciple Debs, an offshoot of the notorious New York Disciples boys’ gang. It was a way to belong, to channel her overwhelming feelings of inadequacy.

But there was a light ahead. In the midst of bloody knife fights with rival girl gangs, Alice stumbled upon the teachings of the West African Yoruba culture, a set of practices with a high value system, one that threads morality, integrity, and wisdom into their way of living. With these new beliefs, she found something she never experienced before, a place where she might learn to redirect her intensity and find peace. She spent Saturdays at bembés, musical get-togethers where she developed a love for the sounds of African drumming, an art form that stayed close to her heart her entire life. It was her Yoruba teacher who suggested she change her name to one that was more representative of her depth and love for the world and its people. The name Afeni was presented to her. It meant “Dear One” and “Lover of People.” And so Alice Faye Williams became known as Afeni.

With a new name and a changing outlook, Afeni, at twenty-one, began to form meaningful bonds. She met a man named Shaheem, a smooth brown-skinned brotha with an untrimmed beard and an afro. Shaheem was a Muslim who closely followed the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam and an early mentor to Malcolm X. He caught Afeni's attention with his wisdom and knowledge. Most important, he was the first person to tell her that Black was beautiful. The two often smoked weed together, talked about the importance of Black history, and discussed the symbolic nature of the color black—that it was a symbol of strength, not weakness. Through these conversations, Afeni gradually began to see that the color of her dark brown skin was not a hindrance but a symbol of self-love and Black pride.

Shaheem framed these late-night conversations around the concept of "the Struggle"—a term Afeni had not heard before. For the first time in her life, her mind was sparked. She was hungry for any information that Shaheem would share. He explained to her that *all Black people*, together, were in a fight to survive and that she, too, was a part of it. She belonged to this club, this common group of people who were weakened by the oppressive forces of an imperialistic society.

One afternoon while walking through Harlem, Afeni heard loud activity and voices bursting from speakers. By then, any sign of a protest had become sweet sounds to her. She knew that Marcus Garvey of the Universal Negro Improvement Association had spoken at this very same corner years before. She knew Malcolm X had also spoken here before he was assassinated. She approached the speaker with curiosity, ready to listen, ready to be inspired. "I was walking down the street one day and this guy was standing on the corner," Afeni remembered. "There was this rally on 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. There was always a rally…. There was this little guy and he had all these people standing beside him like it was this small army, and he was just talking. The thing that made me stop and listen was that he was just saying we could all do something about the police, who were in our community, occupying our community. And it was really hittin'. And after that somehow I found out more about the person and it was Bobby Seale"—one of the young founders of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.

Seale’s speech opened a new world for Afeni. “As a Black woman in this country, born with short hair and Negroid features and a strong personality, if it hadn’t been for the Black Panther Party, I don’t know where I’d be today. They saved me because they armed me. They celebrated me.”

Within months of joining the Black Panther Party, Afeni met and married the Harlem chapter’s deputy minister of defense, Lumumba Shakur. Lumumba was the son of Saladin Shakur, a Garveyite and an associate of Malcolm X. As Saladin’s prominence as a revolutionary nationalist and community leader grew throughout the 1960s, the name began to garner a respect that attracted people in the movement who weren’t related to change their last name to Shakur. Besides fathering his own children, Saladin became a surrogate father and mentor to many young people, including Jeral Williams and JoAnne Byron, who would take the names Mutulu and Assata Shakur, respectively. Mutulu would go on to play an important role in Afeni’s life. Afeni explains Saladin’s legacy, noting that he “was the man who was the father for all the young boys who had no fathers.”

Lumumba Shakur, already married but living under the tenets of Islamic law, was able to have more than one wife. Afeni, young and open to trying new things, thought she would be able to tolerate such an arrangement. And she did—at least, for a time.

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In the aftermath of their arrests, Afeni and Lumumba stood together in the face of legal trouble, miles apart in different jails, waiting to make bail. News about the “Panther 21” hit newspapers across the country, and soon protesters rallied outside the prisons. Supporters held fundraisers to raise bail money and legal fees at venues such as St. Mark’s Church in Manhattan, and money was ultimately “provided by five Presbyterian and Episcopal churches and four ministers.” Composer Leonard Bernstein held a private fundraiser at his home. Actors Angie Dickinson, Jane Fonda, and Donald Sutherland all lent their support to the party’s legal fund.

Afeni found herself locked inside the walls of the Women's House of Detention, a facility marked by the most inhumane living conditions. The space was cramped, housing up to six hundred female prisoners in an area designed to hold four hundred. Prisoners often reported finding worms and cockroaches in their food and dead mice in the showers. There Afeni remained for the rest of 1969. And on December 4, when Afeni and her codefendants heard the news about the brutal, heinous killing of the Panthers' Illinois chapter chairman, Fred Hampton, whom the Chicago Police Department shot dead in his very own home, she and the others became restless.

But on January 31, 1970, after ten months of eating slop and sleeping in filth, Afeni was released on bail. "The Panthers who were in jail had a meeting to decide who would be released first," she recalled. "Because I was articulate, they felt that I would be able to help get them out if I got out first." Afeni's efforts on behalf of her codefendants earned her the title of communications secretary for the Ministry of Information of the Harlem sector of the Black Panthers. Years later, a teenage Tupac would speak proudly about this title in one of his early interviews: "I think that my mother…like Fred Hampton, Mark Clark, Harriet Tubman, they felt they were laying the tracks for the generation to come."

When it came time for the Panther 21 to select legal counsel, Afeni boldly made the decision, perhaps the decision of her life, to defend herself. She didn't have a law degree, not even a high school diploma. She knew, however, that she would work harder for her freedom than any attorney who might be brought in for her. Her sister, Jean, remembered how natural the decision seemed to her. "Afeni had always, since we were little, been independent and willing to take on any challenge that was put in front of her," Jean said. "I wasn't surprised at all when she chose to do this."

Lumumba, on the other hand, considered it to be an irrational decision and tried his best to talk her out of it. "You're gonna fuck everything up," he told Afeni. This decision, in Lumumba's eyes, was the real liability. And not only to himself but to the other Panthers who would be tried alongside them. He believed that a solid, experienced legal team would provide a cohesive and strong courtroom fight and would be critical in securing their freedom, and that Afeni could be the weak link and ultimately cause her and her codefendants to be convicted. Lumumba pleaded with her: “You’re not educated. You’re not qualified. And you’re too emotional.” Afeni stood her ground. Her decision was final. She declined the help of hired counsel and showed up on the first day of court ready to take on the prosecution.

The trial officially commenced on February 2, 1970. The ongoing Panther rallies along 100 Centre Street in Manhattan created a ready-to-snap tension as protesters shared the sidewalk with an intimidating police presence. Black supporters and Panther members marched alongside white protesters holding signs reading SMASH RACIST COURTS—FREE THE PANTHER 21! and END THE RACIST FRAME-UP OF THE BLACK PANTHERS—YOUTH AGAINST WAR AND FASCISM. Charges were delayed or dropped against eight of the twenty-one Panthers initially detained, due to some having to fight dual cases, being too ill, or being too young, but the remaining thirteen would stand trial.

Lumumba led the defendants as they filed inside the courtroom, his fist shyly raised, mumbling “Power to the People” to his comrades and to supporters seated in the courtroom. Finally, Afeni, the only Panther who had been released on bail, walked confidently down the courtroom aisle and into the bay of the court. As she walked past Joseph A. Phillips, the chief prosecutor representing the State of New York, her smile was almost smug. She was ready to fight for her freedom.

The court clerk announced, “All rise!”

White haired, Harvard-educated New York State Supreme Court Justice John M. Murtagh took his seat in front of a full courtroom: a pair of state prosecutors, a team of six defense attorneys, thirteen defendants, a lineup of potential jurors, L-shaped tables of reporters, and many court marshals. Security was tight. “There were thirteen of us on trial,” Afeni said. “And there was a guard behind each one of our seats.” Packed in the gallery, a gaggle of Panther sympathizers stood by, ready and willing to hold the American justice system accountable by their presence. The atmosphere in the courtroom was volatile.

The first order of business was jury selection. Afeni stood alongside the defense team’s two lead attorneys, Gerald Lefcourt and Charles McKinney. The three posed a line of aggressive questioning to the potential jurors.

“What did you think of the death of Martin Luther King?” Afeni questioned Charles Fuller, a Black juror candidate.

Fuller responded, “I think it was unfortunate that it had to happen.”

She asked, “Do you think Black people have a right to be angry?”

“In what sense?”

“Just…*angry*?” she asked, again. Her tone was gentle but direct.

“No.”

With that, Afeni released him with a peremptory challenge.

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Although Afeni stood strong in court each day, the year in jail and the pressure of being a revolutionary fighting for her life wore on her. Over the course of the trial, her marriage to Lumumba began to wither. The rules of a polygamous marriage brought frustration and tension between her and Lumumba’s first wife, Sayeeda. “He’d sleep with me sometimes. He’d sleep with her. She took care of the kids and the house. Stuff I was not interested in anyway. I was never very domestic,” Afeni would explain in her memoir. “And me and Lumumba did our thing with the party. I didn’t have no conflict. But it was killing Sayeeda inside.” Eventually, Afeni began to separate herself from the marriage and sought solace and affirmation in other men.

The fall of 1970, she met a Panther from Jersey City named Billy Garland at a strategy officers meeting. “Billy was the person from the Jersey chapter of the Black Panther Party that worked in distribution,” Afeni recalled, “which were the people that picked up the newspapers and distributed them across the city. So he had access to a van.” And in that van, Billy drove Afeni to court each morning. She couldn’t help but notice his chiseled cheekbones and thick eyebrows. The physical attraction the two felt for each other grew quickly, but after a quick consummation of the relationship, their bond dissolved in a matter of a few short days. Eddie "Jamal" Joseph, the youngest member of the Panther 21, remembered the radical, stressful climate in which Afeni lived as one that was unusually hard for the youth of urban America. "You had healthy young women having miscarriages," he said. "You had eighteen- and nineteen-year-old men with bleeding ulcers. This is the kind of stress that people lived with. Living in that day, the point of human comfort might come one night with someone you would never see again sharing a moment 'cause everybody thought that tomorrow will be the day that I'm going to get killed or I'm going to jail for the rest of my life. So even the idea of intimacy was the intimacy of war. So Tupac was conceived in this whirlwind. That's the energy that brought him."

Press coverage of the trial quickly turned Afeni into a local celebrity. Her new status caught the attention and admiration of some of Harlem's leading gangsters, who came to know her through articles in the local newspapers. When she wasn't in court fighting for herself, she was out soliciting contributions from businesses for the Panther 21 legal defense fund. She spent evenings socializing and fundraising at Sterling's Den, a busy restaurant and bar on the corner of Boston Road and 169th in the Bronx. While there, she met a man named Kenneth "Legs" Saunders. Handsome but hard, Legs was a lieutenant of the famed drug lord Nicky Barnes, and he got his name from his long legs and deep pockets. After the short romance with Billy Garland, Afeni welcomed Legs into her life and the possibility of developing something long-term. But their relationship, too, was cut short. Plucked from the streets on a parole violation, Legs was sent away to prison, leaving Afeni with a brief but lasting memory.

Afeni had not told Lumumba about her decision to see other men outside their marital arrangement, but he soon learned about it. His pride wounded, he lashed out at her and told her she was no longer a Shakur. Divorce under Islamic Law, by *talaq,* could be achieved with a basic verbal demand. With a witness standing beside them, Lumumba recited, "I divorce thee. I divorce thee. I divorce thee." In an instant, they were no longer bound by marriage.

Afeni completely disregarded Lumumba's request to strike "Shakur" from her name. She'd confidently grown into becoming Afeni Shakur, and she valued the notable status she achieved under it. She had become part of something bigger than herself. It was *her* name now. Her journey. Her desire to keep the Shakur name was about her own identity. There was no way she was going back to being Afeni Williams. She requested a meeting with Lumumba's father, Saladin, with hopes that he'd override Lumumba's demand. Without hesitation, despite the failed marriage of her and his son, Saladin Shakur continued to hold Afeni in the highest regard, thus giving her his blessing and full permission to keep her name.

In November of 1970, Afeni learned she was pregnant. "I had to tell Lumumba as he sat next to me in court," Afeni recalled. "And that wasn't a pleasant experience. That was an event in and of itself." Each day she silently rehearsed what she would say about the child inside her. Although their marriage was over, she was still concerned about his reaction to the news. Adding to her confusion was the fact that she did not know whether the father was Billy Garland or Legs Saunders. Afeni wanted this child more than anything. But for the time being, she pushed all thoughts of telling Lumumba from her mind while she fought for her freedom. Her baby, still an embryo, became the guiding light in her plan to carve a path of integrity and revolutionary spirit for her child to follow, no matter the trial's outcome.

Afeni was diligent in her legal preparations, especially for her cross-examination of the prosecution's star witness, the undercover informer Detective Ralph White, whom Afeni had known as Yedwa. She had never trusted him. The very day he had walked into the Harlem Black Panther offices, she had emphatically warned her co-Panthers that he was a cop. The woman who never backed down from a teenage street fight now faced a new battle. She was about to step into the ring with a Black man who had deceived her, within a judicial system that was not designed to provide fairness for Black Americans.

Afeni spent nights at her sister Jean's apartment, across town at 1240 Woodycrest Avenue in the Bronx, assembling questions for her cross-examination. When the day came, she was brilliant. She asked the detective about his perspective on her involvement in the party, whether he saw it as more political or more militaristic.

"As far as you're talking to…about what we had to do in the streets, I thought it was good you know," said White. "But as far as your involvement, I thought you were more military than political."

Afeni stood tall and confident as she proceeded. "What *involvement*?" she asked.

"Things you say, things I saw you doing," White answered. "You would go into a thing about pigs, and offing pigs and different things about offing pigs, and this pig is this and this pig is that; and, if you find a pig, deal with him and everything."

Afeni tightened her questioning. "I understand that. But you said there were things you *saw* me doing, I just want to hear one thing."

White replied: "I remember a meeting at the Panther office…you went into a thing about icing the pigs, along with that military thing, and [you were] very emotional. I remember that, plus other things I can't remember offhand."

What came through in the questioning was that White had not seen Afeni commit any crime.

As Afeni continued, she emphasized her charitable efforts in connection with the Panthers. She would make White tell the jury what he *had* seen her do. "Did you ever see me at Lincoln Hospital?

"Yes, I have," Detective White answered.

"Did you ever see me at the schools working?"

"Yes, I have."

"Ever see me in the street working?"

"Yes, I have."

"Are these some of the things that led you to think I was military-minded?

"No, it was not."

"You don't remember the other things."

“At the time I remembered them, then. I remember…” Detective White paused. “You reminded me of the good things you were doing. If you reminded me of some of the things you said, I could answer that.”

“Yes, I guess so,” she said snidely. After she asked for a brief recess, she returned and said firmly, “No further questions.”

Afeni sat down. It was clear to everyone in the courtroom, including the prosecution’s lead attorney, Joseph Phillips, that in this moment Afeni had emerged as an astute litigator. “In those twenty minutes she had made Mr. Phillips’ witness her own,” wrote journalist Murray Kempton, who later won a National Book Award for his book about the trial, “and in their coupling, she had rescued herself and all the others.”

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After Fred Hampton was killed, diverging philosophies between Black Panthers co-founder Huey Newton and Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver created tension, and the party started to implode. Afeni never suspected it would lead some of the defendants to fear for their lives and devise plans to jump bail without consulting her and Joan Bird, the only other female codefendant. But on Monday morning, February 8, 1971, when Afeni and Joan rode up the courthouse elevator together and entered the courtroom, there was a heavy feeling in the air that Afeni couldn’t quite place. Something wasn’t right. As she looked around she immediately knew. Richard Moore and Michael Tabor, two of the thirteen codefendants, hadn’t arrived. It took Afeni an instant to realize they were no-shows. They had jumped bail. She was stunned. They had the audacity to throw away the loyalty and camaraderie that came with joining the Black Panther Party. The weight of being betrayed by someone she trusted consumed her, a pernicious festering that chipped away at her heart for the rest of her life. As Afeni remembered, “We had an agreement amongst ourselves to tell each other. It wasn’t about the jumping ’cause everybody had the right to, but we were respectful of each [other].” When Moore and Tabor left they broke that trust.

Justice Murtagh reacted harshly to Moore and Tabor's decision to flee. He informed the court that the illegal actions of the two men subsequently made Afeni and Joan serious flight risks. Two men were gone. Afeni and Joan would pay. Murtagh remanded their bail and sent them back to the horror of the Women's House of Detention.

By then, almost six months pregnant, Afeni requested that Murtagh reverse his decision. She stood next to Lumumba, who was still quite angry about her pregnancy, and spoke with pride, as if "she were bearing a prince." "I would like to bring to the attention of the court what I am sure the court doesn't know about," she said, "and that's the situation that exists with Miss Bird and myself and for the other women that are being held in the House of Detention. The boilers are broken there. There is no hot water. The conditions are not just abominable, as they were before; they are inhuman. The food that the women eat is cooked in one night. Like today's dinner was cooked last night and is sitting on the table waiting to be served tonight. There is no toilet paper. The facilities are not bad anymore; they are ridiculous. Women should not be put in there."

The judge was skeptical about Afeni's statement and her request for improved conditions, suspecting that her interest was "in making a statement for the press."

"The interest, Mr. Murtagh," she replied, "is in assuring the life of my child."

The judge threw her back in jail. When Afeni returned to the women's prison that afternoon, they told her to undress and spread her legs so they could administer a strip search. If she refused, she'd be put in solitary confinement. She didn't hesitate to choose solitary. "I slept through the rats, the isolation, the Spam, the fake white bread, and all that," she later wrote.

Days later, as the Black Panther Party continued to splinter, Lumumba's brother, Zayd, came to visit Afeni. When he asked her whose side was she going to be on, her response was simple. "The only side I'm on is the side of my child." She remembers, "They started pressuring me to pick sides even though I was fighting for my life at the time, and I was five months pregnant! They didn't ask me how I was doing or if I needed anything. It was always about the party and which side I was on." For the first time, she stood alone and on her own. She felt triple crossed—by the court system, by the NYPD officers who had infiltrated the Black Panthers, and now by her fellow Panther brothers. But in spite of the betrayal, she had found a new and deeper dedication: her child.

Staunch supporters and fellow Panthers continued to picket outside both the courtroom and the Women's House of Detention, their presence increasing when the court denied Afeni's request of one egg and one glass of milk per day to nourish her unborn child. Fortunately, the prison cooks were Afeni's admirers; they secretly delivered a relatively nutritious meal to her each night. "Tupac always belonged to everybody," Afeni recalled of that time. "When I was pregnant in jail…the brothers that worked in the kitchen, when they brought our food down, they brought me real food. They took care of us."

As the trial wore on, a number of courtroom spectators, many of whom were strangers, never missed a day. Frankie Zipp was one of them. Each day, at the end of the court session, Zipp raised his "Power to the People" fist at Afeni. He wanted her to know that no matter what happened, she had friends. "None of us knew him," Afeni recalls. "But he came to court every day without fail dressed in a suit. By the end of the trial, Afeni introduced herself one afternoon after the judge granted a quick recess. She recalled of Frankie, "He had been a dope fiend all his life, but by now he was off the needle. His arms were scars, abscessed and swollen, and his hands were as big as basketballs. He made his money from the street, but there was nothing dirty about him."

But even with all the support from friends and strangers, as Afeni lay down in her cell each night, she relied mainly on her own spiritual strength to combat the inadequate nutrition her baby received. She turned her spiritual energy into poetry and stories. One night, as she sat uncomfortably on the cold, hard bench of her cell, she scribbled a verse she titled "From the Pig Pen" onto a tattered piece of paper. When she finished the poem she read it softly to her belly:

What are these bars that intrude
upon my sight?
These shivering lines that test my
physical might!
Do they not know who I am or
from where I came?…
For I have a revolutionary story
that I must tell
And my hands refuse to be beaten
by this tormented cell
There is a force in here a whole
new Black community
a motivating force—ready to make
liberation a living reality!

In jail, Afeni avoided the issue of Tupac’s paternity. Instead, she thought about the life she and her child would have together. She feared a guilty verdict, and she dreaded the possibility of not being able to raise her baby. These feelings inspired her to write a letter to “the unborn baby within my womb,” both an apology for her own life and a mandate for her child’s. “I suppose one day you’re going to wonder about all this mess that’s been going on now and I just had to make sure you understood a few things,” it began.

> *I’ve learned a lot in two years about being a woman and it’s for this reason that I want to talk to you…. I’ve discovered what I should have known a long time ago—that change has to begin within ourselves—whether there is a revolution today or tomorrow—we still must face the problem of purging ourselves of the larceny that we have all inherited. I hope we do not pass it on to you because you are our only hope. You must weigh our actions and decide for yourselves what was good and what was bad. It is obvious that somewhere we failed but I know it will not—it cannot end here.*

In preparation for her closing statement in court, Afeni read everything she could get her hands on. She studied Fidel Castro's 1953 speech "History Will Absolve Me," drawing inspiration from his manifesto of self-defense. She would prepare a final appeal to convince the jurors that she was not the criminal that chief prosecutor Phillips set out to prove she was.

When the day arrived, Afeni was eight months pregnant. She slowly walked into the courtroom, her protruding belly tucked gracefully beneath her plaid maternity dress. Gone were the knee-high suede boots and fashion-forward outfits she'd worn to court while out on bail. Resilient, Afeni and her ten remaining codefendants filed into the courtroom, still under security fit to handle an angry mob. Afeni stood face-to-face with a justice system that imprisoned her and threatened to take her baby away from her, and that for the last twenty-two months had tried to brand her a terrorist. She looked at the jury, Murray Kempton remembered, "as though suppliant before some king at whose feet she had arrived across snows and through thorns, past guards and through mocking courtiers."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say," she began.

> *I don't know how I'm supposed to justify the charges that Mr. Phillips has brought before the court against me. But I do know that none of these charges have been proven and I'm not talking about proven beyond a reasonable doubt. I'm saying that none of the charges have been proven, period. That nothing has been proven in this courtroom, that I, or any of the defendants did any of these things that Mr. Phillips insists that we did do.*
>
> *So why are we here? Why are any of us here? I don't know. But I would appreciate it if you would end this nightmare, because I'm tired of it and I can't justify it to my mind. There's no logical reason for us to have gone through the last two years as we have, to be threatened with imprisonment because somebody somewhere is watching and waiting to justify being a spy. So do what you have to do. But please don't forget what you saw and heard in this courtroom.... Let history record you as a*

> *jury who would not kneel to the outrageous bidding of the state. Justify our faith in you. Show us that we were not wrong in assuming that you would judge us fairly. And remember that that's all we're asking of you. All we ask of you is that you judge us fairly. Please judge us according to the way that you want to be judged.*

The power of Afeni's speech led to one of Justice Murtagh's most unexpected announcements. On May 3, he informed the court that he had decided to parole Afeni for the remainder of the trial. Even the defense attorneys were completely caught off guard. Murtagh asked Afeni, "Will you promise to continue being present in court when able?" She nodded. Justice Murtagh ended his announcement, stating that he was, in fact, interested in the rights of the child and of Afeni. She would be free until the verdict came down.

Afeni was incredulous. She burst into tears. Afterward, in the hallway, reporters gathered around her to ask questions. Still in shock, practically speechless, she told them all that she was happy to be heading home with her sister, Jean.

Ten days later, on Thursday, May 13, 1971, the final day of what was then the longest and costliest legal trial in the history of the Supreme Court of New York, the jury began deliberation. It took less than ninety minutes to reach a verdict.

When the jury returned to the courtroom, Judge Murtagh asked the jury foreman, James "Ingram" Fox, to rise. The clerk asked, "Members of the jury, have you agreed upon a verdict?"

"Yes," Fox answered.

The clerk spoke. "As to the defendant, Lumumba Shakur, on the first count charging the crime of conspiracy of murder in the first degree, how do you find sir, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

Mumbles in the courtroom increased in a crescendo as Fox continued with eleven more verdicts: all not guilty. The spectators raised their fists high. "Right on!" they cried. "Power to the People!" "Power to the Jury." A roar of excitement and glee filled the room as Fox continued to read the jury's verdict, rolling through the long list of charges against the Panthers in an almost melodic tone: "Not guilty" 156 more times. Not guilty of arson, not guilty of conspiracy to blow up buildings, not guilty of attempted murder.

All Afeni could do was stand silent. Tears of relief streamed down her face. Lumumba could only shout. And then they locked in a celebratory embrace.

They were free.

"My mother was pregnant with me while she was in prison," Tupac would explain years later. "She was her own attorney. Never been to law school. She was facing three hundred some-odd years. One black woman—pregnant—beat the case. That just goes to show you the strength of a Black woman and the strength of the oppressed."

Only hours later, the jurors, the defense lawyers, Afeni, Jean, and many of the other codefendants met at the law offices of Lefcourt and Crain for a moment of celebratory closure. They sipped Champagne and reminisced about the past twenty-two months. Everyone was smiling. Benjamin Giles, juror number nine, was there. He asked Afeni where she'd learned to perform like "that."

"Fear, Mr. Giles, plain fear," she replied.

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Thirty-four days later, on June 16, Afeni sat on her sister's couch, scanning the pages of *The New York Times*. She resented the anti-Panther propaganda that littered its pages, and she expected to see her name sprinkled through the articles. Her sister washed the afternoon dishes, peered out the kitchen window, and absently watched a family of rats scurry across the abandoned parking lot. Both women were lost in their thoughts, absorbed by the quiet air between them.

The first contraction rolled through Afeni like soft thunder. Jean glanced at her from across the room and watched her pick up the phone. A few minutes later, new friend Frankie Zipp swooped his brand-new 1971 white convertible Cadillac curbside in front of the apartment and quickly helped Afeni into the car. From a back seat upholstered in red leather, Afeni and Jean stared at the steering wheel and Frankie's swollen, almost deformed hands, permanently damaged during his ravaging days of heroin addiction. They rode in silence, waiting for the hospital to appear.

Hours after Afeni arrived at New York Flower–Fifth Avenue Hospital, Tupac Amaru Shakur was born. But the paranoia bred into Afeni by the Panthers and by her time in prison had only grown since the end of the trial. In order to deter the government from marking her son as a Panther baby and thus flagging him as a "threat" to society, she decided to write the name Parish Lesane Crooks on the birth certificate, named after Carol Jean Crooks, aka "Crooksie," Afeni's ex-cellmate turned dear friend. "Lesane" was her sister Jean's last name. "I picked any name. I picked a combination of all the names," Afeni says. "I let the gay, lesbian woman (Crooksie), who was my friend, name him Parish. Lesane was for my sister's family at the time. And Crooks also, for the Crooks crew. That's right. That's what was on the paper. But Tupac was always his name. Tupac Amaru Shakur. He was always in my mind a soldier in exile from the beginning. That's how I saw it."

Tupac means "royal" or "shining," and Amaru means "serpent." The name belonged originally to a line of honored Peruvian Incan chiefs. It was Afeni's wish for Tupac to embody not only the spirit of Africa but also the spirit of all the world's indigenous people. "What I wanted to do was to name my child not after an African but after an indigenous person that was not African," she later explained. "Because I needed for him to know that we had the same identity with every indigenous person in the world. We were from a generation that believed that the names were the foundation for the child. So I wanted him to stand on [a broad] foundation. Rather than having a blind affiliation with color, I wanted him to find the deeper meaning of why we fight. Not just because we're Black, but because like other indigenous people in the world, we have our common struggle. That's what I wanted for him was for him to have that. And that’s why his name, Tupac Amaru, was beautiful to hear.”

When the doctor wrapped baby Tupac in a blanket and carried him out of the delivery room, Afeni grew nervous. Even though the doctor assured her that her son would be safe, Afeni feared that someone would intentionally switch, harm, or steal her baby while he was out of her sight. She asked Jean to stay close, to confirm the baby’s identification before he was taken to the nursery. Jean waited anxiously in the hallway, finally to be met by the doctor and her newborn nephew. The doctor held the little baby in front of Jean, just as he’d promised. She smiled at her nephew’s tiny body wrapped tightly in a blanket. “Okay, Darlin’ Dear, there you are, I know you now, ain’t nothin’ gonna happen to ya, ’cause Auntie Jean is here to make sure of that.” These were her very first words to Tupac. She was to deliver on this promise many times in the years to come.

02

DEAR MAMA

1971–1974

> I finally understand for a woman it ain't easy trying to raise a man.
>
> You always was committed, a poor single mother on welfare, tell me how you did it.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

Even free, Afeni faced instability and poverty. Her struggles cemented her worldview that inequity, lack of opportunity, and social injustice were the evils destroying her community. Though the Panthers were splintering, she knew the "war" with the government was not over. Her commitment to the fight for equality intensified, even as the sting of betrayal from her Panther comrades and the undercover police bred a "trust nobody" mentality. These stark realities in Afeni's young life set the stage not only for the world that Tupac was born into but also for the one he walked in throughout this life. Ingrained from birth and into his upbringing were both Afeni's fears and her dreams for her son—the expectation that he would carry on her dedication to the Black community and the will to help others achieve freedom from oppression.

Tupac took this path to heart. Years later he would say, "I think my mother knew that freedom wouldn't come in her lifetime just like I know that it won't come in mine. But it's a matter of either we stay like this or somebody sacrifices…. Somebody lay a track so we don't stay in a three-hundred-sixty-degree deadly circle. Somebody has to break out and risk losing everything and being poor and getting beat down; somebody has to do something."

Emerging from the two-year whirlwind of a horrid incarceration and the stress of a high-profile court case, Afeni had no plan, no place of her own, and no money. But she knew she was always welcomed by her sister until she figured out her next steps, no matter how hard life got.

Baby Tupac spent his very first days at 1240 Woodycrest Avenue in the Bronx, near Yankee Stadium. The three-bedroom tenement apartment was on the first floor of a five-story walk-up in the middle of an ethnically diverse neighborhood, with Black and Puerto Rican communities recently joined by an influx of Dominican immigrants. Living conditions on Woodycrest were crowded. Aunt Jean, now a single mother, had five young children all under the age of nine. They were packed in, making do with what little space they had. Jean's eldest, Bill Jr., was eight years old. Scott, born a year later, was seven. Kenny was five years old, and Greg, who would be diagnosed with non-verbal autism, was four. Jamala (named after Jamal Joseph, the youngest member of the Panther 21), the only girl, was just two years old.

Bill remembered the day Afeni brought Tupac home. "He was like a little teddy bear. Immediately everyone started to fight over who was gonna hold him next. And for days he was passed around to all the people in the house. Friends from the movement would come by the house day and night to see him. And Tupac was just there wrapped up in a blanket. He was like a little baby doll." Right away Tupac was exposed to the flurry and constant activity of his five young cousins. "When I was a little baby I remember that one moment of calm peace," Tupac later said, "and three minutes after that it was on."

The sibling-like bond between Tupac and his cousins was immediate and would stand the test of time. But the curse of poverty dogged their existence. Food was scarce, clothes were torn, and rent was due. Luckily, Tupac was still too young to notice that he was going without. Instead, by day he was entertained by the clamor of his cousins—and by night, by his mother's soothing presence as she rocked him back and forth in the antique wooden cradle next to her bed.

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In these early months of Tupac's life, while Afeni was facing so many uncertainties, she came across a glimpse of hope, a momentary calm in the constant churn of instability. Her legal prowess during the Panther 21 trial had impressed many Panther supporters, leading to a handful of generous offers of assistance. One of them came from Ann Dubole, a wealthy Manhattanite who lived in a quaint apartment in the heart of Greenwich Village but planned to spend several months out of state. She suggested Afeni and her newborn son take advantage of her vacant apartment, offering them their own little oasis, rent-free, while she was gone. Afeni accepted, overwhelmed by Dubole's generosity and relieved to have a chance to establish her independence.

This small apartment in a peaceful enclave on Bank Street became a sanctuary for the new mother and son, a place for them to bond, for Tupac to have his mother all to himself. Ultimately, the apartment proved to be one of the most secure and comfortable homes Afeni would create for them. Afeni's friend Crooksie lent a helping hand, brightening Tupac's bedroom with a fresh coat of paint and filling it with as many toys as she could afford. She also helped Afeni care for Tupac. The luxury of having a friend to help change, feed, and bathe the baby allowed Afeni a respite from the painful experience of her legal battle and incarceration. Finally, her mind began to calm and her thoughts grew clearer.

The Panther 21 trial might have ended in victory, but it was only one battle in the war, as Afeni often called it, between right and wrong. She watched the Black Panther Party continue to splinter under the pressure of the government's ongoing siege. Fred Hampton was dead. Eldridge Cleaver had fled the country. Bobby Seale was jailed after being infamously gagged in the courtroom during his trial in Chicago. While some Panthers responded by moving away from organized activism, others gravitated toward a new, more aggressive movement: the Black Liberation Army, an underground militia that saw "armed rebellion" as the only viable tactic against a violently oppressive system.

Afeni would not go that route. But neither would she relinquish her passion for and commitment to the Black freedom movement. As a mother, she developed a new mindset. She would continue to defy the system and fight for the good of the people, but not as a member of the organized armed resistance. Instead, she would challenge the inequities of education, indecent housing, poor medical care, oppression, and discrimination. She would continue to fight the adverse effects of systemic racism and oppressive forces without having to risk her life. And the best way to do that, she decided, was through the law.

During the Panther 21 trial, Afeni had met an attorney with Bronx Legal Services named Richard Fischbein. Given Afeni's evident talent in the courtroom, Fischbein needed little convincing to bring her aboard as a legal assistant. She made an immediate impact when she and her coworkers helped to organize one of the first legal services unions. The job also had one joyful perk: Afeni was able to bring her baby to work each day.

On weekdays, the work of building a more equitable world took priority. But on weekends Afeni and Tupac would take advantage of New York's cultural offerings. They attended art festivals, discovered new ethnic culinary treats, and found themselves among crowds listening to emerging leaders speak about the plight of Black communities in America. One afternoon they stopped in at the Armory on 168th Street to listen to Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, and walked into a remarkable moment in time that would mark both coincidence and fate in Tupac's life ahead. In the crowd that day was Billy Garland, the man whom Afeni believed was possibly Tupac's father. Garland was with his wife and his wife's close friend, a young woman named Karen Lee. Lee, who at that moment could never guess that in twenty years she would become Tupac's publicist, recalled the moment when Afeni approached them. "Billy's wife was a good friend of mine, but Afeni was sort of a heroine to me because I had read a lot about the Panther 21," said Lee, "and I knew of her because of her work in the movement." Karen watched Afeni walk toward Billy and put baby Tupac in his arms. "It was a bit of an awkward situation at the time. She said, 'I think you want to meet your son.' " Lee remembers that "he was only a couple weeks old. All I can remember is those big eyes peering out of the blanket and how cute he was."

A few months later, when Legs Saunders was released from prison, he wasted no time in making his way to the apartment on Bank Street to see the baby who was born while he was locked up. He waltzed past Afeni at the door and went straight to the crib, where Tupac, coiffed in cornrows, lay asleep. Peering down at the peaceful infant, Legs proclaimed, "Yeah, he's mine. That boy's definitely mine." His smile was proud. Afeni stood in the doorway watching him gloat over Tupac. Although she still could not confirm definitively the paternity of her baby, she smiled at Legs and yielded to the magic of the moment.

But once again, Legs didn't stick around for long. Having just been released from prison, he needed to find a place to live and get his life back on track. And despite his promise to be in his son's life, it would be years before Tupac and Afeni saw him regularly.

Billy Garland and Legs Saunders represented two very different directions regarding the question of Tupac's paternity. But there were no clear answers. Billy did not claim Tupac that day at the Armory. And weeks later, Legs vowed Tupac was his. The mystery of Tupac's biological father would not be solved until many years later.

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In 1972, as Tupac turned one, his time on Bank Street came to an end. Afeni moved them back to Jean's apartment on Woodycrest. Even though the living situation became crowded once again, life with so many cousins in one house was fun for Tupac. As the youngest, he was the focus of everyone's attention. His older cousins took great delight in him, enticing him into pranks and making him the butt of many harmless jokes, especially as Tupac became a toddler. "We used to tease Tupac all the time," Bill remembered. "There was this empty mayonnaise jar with eggshells and water in it. I can't remember what it was used for or why it was in the fridge, but just to get our kicks, we used to take off the lid and make Pac smell it. It stunk real bad…. We used to get a kick out of making him smell it and we'd watch his facial expressions. We just used to like to see him frown up over and over again."

In those years, Tupac was at his mother's side as she waged political war against the system. His cousin Kenny, five years older, remembered traveling to different boroughs' political meetings held in people's homes. "We always thought we were going to a party or a get-together. But really it was a rally or a meeting," he recalled. "We used to go to Queens to visit with our friend Abdul Malik and his family. We'd play with his kids while the adults were upstairs rallying. The kids were always together playing with the other revolutionary kids."

For Afeni, the call to the fight for freedom had been unavoidable. When she read the newspaper or watched the news, or even walked outside, she was reminded of the inequities that were imbedded in society. Her urge to help burned inside her. She remained resolute in her work ensuring tenants' rights and improving prison conditions for women, but now she added more explicit political crusades. One was to help her Panther comrades who were wrongly imprisoned.

The year before, in 1971, the FBI's rogue initiatives against the Panthers and other activists had finally been exposed when eight white antiwar activists burglarized an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania. The boxes of highly classified government information the activists stole would ultimately expose the dubiously legal counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO). Betty Medsger from *The Washington Post* was the first to report the findings: "One of the things that I remember most from those files, was the truly blanket surveillance of African American people that was described. It was quite stunning."

The exposure galvanized activists like Afeni, who could now see that her paranoia over FBI surveillance and subversion was completely justified. By the time Tupac had started walking, Afeni's primary focus had become her involvement with the legal and political effort to disband COINTELPRO. She became national coordinator of the National Task Force for COINTELPRO Litigation and Research, joining the growing effort to expose the depths of the government's malfeasance and to win freedom for Black Panther members imprisoned because of the program.

One of the task force's top priorities for release was Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, the Black Panthers' deputy minister of defense and Afeni's close friend. Pratt was serving twenty-five years to life—including eight years of solitary confinement—at San Quentin State Prison after being falsely accused of robbing and fatally shooting Caroline Olsen, a schoolteacher, on a Santa Monica tennis court. Despite Pratt's insistence that he was over three hundred miles away in Northern California when the crime took place, the jury sided with the prosecution's witness, Julius "Julio" Butler, who told the court that Pratt had confessed to the killing.[*]

Geronimo and Afeni had first met as fellow Panthers when she and Jamal Joseph were asked by party leaders to fly to the West Coast for a Panther meeting to discuss the Panther 21's predicament and current state of affairs. Geronimo was then leading the Los Angeles chapter of the party, and Afeni had worked her way up the ranks in the Harlem chapter. They became instant friends and remained close for the rest of his life, even during the years of Geronimo's incarceration. "Geronimo was arrested December 1970," Afeni said. "Tupac was born June 16, 1971. Geronimo's birthday is September thirteenth [the day Tupac died]. So on September 13, 1996, Geronimo gets to his cell and on his bed is what's usually there from his nephew in his commissary [money], on the day of his birthday and the day of his death." Geronimo's conviction was finally overturned the following spring. "I personally live in unrequited pain why Geronimo couldn't be out during my son's life," Afeni said. "My son's entire life was spent in the bookends of Geronimo's illegal incarceration."

When Geronimo sent Afeni a letter from prison asking for her to come help with his case, she and Tupac got on a plane to California. For hours, Tupac would sit on the floor and play with his toys while Afeni conferred with Geronimo's lawyers. With a constant stream of legal jargon seeping into his developing consciousness, and the endless union meetings and fundraising events he attended with his mother, Tupac's verbal skills matured rapidly. Kenny remembered that Tupac could articulate sentences at a surprisingly young age. “He started talking very early,” said Kenny. “He picked up stuff and remembered things quickly, quicker than the average two-year-old.”

Few things mattered more to Afeni than the integrity of Tupac’s education. While Afeni taught Tupac his ABCs, numbers, and colors, she started her search for a preschool program. She used what money she had to enroll Tupac in a private daycare called the Little Red Pre-school, with hopes he’d begin to gain a sense of structure and discipline to augment his homeschooling. Unfortunately, such hope quickly diminished. One day, Afeni arrived early to pick him up. As she entered the daycare center, she saw him standing atop one of the tables, simulating the moves of legendary entertainer James Brown. He danced up and down the long table, gyrating his little four-year-old hips, concluding his mini concert with a signature James Brown split.

Afeni was furious. She marched toward her son, snatched him from the table, and carried him out of the classroom. She believed that education, not entertainment, was essential in the early development of a child. The teacher tried to explain that it was the end of the day and that Tupac was “just putting on a little show,” but Afeni would not be placated. She retorted, “Education is what my son is here for, not to entertain you all.” Black people across America were in crisis. The classroom was a place for her son to learn, not a place for him to put on shows for his classmates. She informed his daycare provider that he would not return to a school that, in her eyes, would not take her son seriously and that seemed to prioritize entertainment over education.

At home that evening, Afeni’s anger hadn’t subsided. She spanked Tupac while she grilled him. “What did I tell you about how an independent young Black man should act? You are an independent Black man, Tupac.”

Afeni wanted him to be an independent and analytical thinker, but he was much too young to understand her urgent emotional state. Neither did he understand the complexities of her daily work and the pressure she felt to prove that Geronimo Pratt was innocent. He didn’t yet know what it really meant when someone uttered the words “freedom fighter.” He’d heard the words “oppression” and “inequality,” but he didn’t yet grasp the setbacks and consequences these actions held for Black lives. And mostly, he didn’t yet understand the grave concern his mother held for him as a young Black man in America. He was only four years old. But to Afeni, his age didn’t matter. She continued to drive home the lesson in her punishment. “There is no reason for us to dance,” she told him. “Do you understand? There is *nothing* for us to dance about. Now go to your room.”

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In 1974, Afeni and Tupac left 1240 Woodycrest in the Bronx to find a place of their own. She secured a small apartment in a nine-story brick building on West 108th Street in the bustling urban mecca of Harlem. Their new apartment teemed with incense, candles, art and books, trinkets, and mudcloths draped over the furniture, all of which contributed to a warm atmosphere in which Tupac flourished. As Afeni worked at the kitchen table through the night, Tupac buzzed around the apartment, sometimes on foot, sometimes on his tricycle, absorbing the sounds from the ’45s that spun on their record player, artists such as Gil Scott-Heron, the Main Ingredient, and the Last Poets. Jamal Joseph, who remained close to Afeni after the Panther 21 trial, remembered Tupac’s boundless energy at this time. “I used to see him come tearing through the house…like, ‘Get out of my way! Get out of my way!’ ” He zoomed around fearlessly on his tricycle with a football helmet on, but Jamal recounts, “the way he was doing it, it wasn’t a football helmet—it was his motorcycle and a racing helmet.”

When he’d run himself tired, Afeni often sang him to sleep with songs like “Go Up Moses” and “Hey, That’s No Way to Say Goodbye,” a Leonard Cohen song that had been memorably covered by Roberta Flack. Afeni impressed on Tupac that music was serious business, an art form that was a vehicle for expression and emotion. “Where other kids got little toy bongo drums, Tupac got real bongo drums and a talking drum,” she recalled. “There was always a musical instrument that wasn’t a toy around. I believed that children should have music to calm themselves.”

As Afeni walked the delicate balance of work and motherhood, activism consumed her thoughts. With a baby's future to fight for, she doubled down on her dedication, hoping she might build a world with more opportunity for her son. With her work taking her on the road more, Tupac often spent nights with his cousins and also with Afeni's close friend, Yaasmyn Fula, in New Jersey. Fula was also deeply invested in Black activism and had just had her own child, Yafeu, with whom Tupac grew close and developed a brotherly bond during these overnight stays.

Tupac also spent many nights at the home of Afeni's friend from the movement, Karen Kadison, with whom Afeni had bonded over their shared desire to challenge the inequities that existed in their country. Karen and her parents (who were white) had moved to Harlem after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. "My parents believed it was up to us," she remembered. "That we had to be the ones to integrate." Soon after they met, before Afeni joined the Panthers, Afeni moved into Karen's brownstone in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where the two balanced life's pleasures—dancing, drinking, drugs, and men.

The two remained close while Afeni was in prison, with Karen promising Afeni that she'd help Aunt Jean take care of Tupac if Afeni was convicted. Now she watched Tupac when Afeni needed extra help during her travels. One of those times, while a six-month-old Tupac was fast asleep, Karen heard unfamiliar noises outside her home. Less than a year after Afeni was acquitted, the threat of police raids remained a constant fear, for Karen as well as Afeni. But Karen didn't panic. Instead, she thought of a hiding place—somewhere to safeguard Afeni's treasure where the police wouldn't find him. She gathered Tupac from where he slept, gently placed him in one of her dresser drawers, and closed it, leaving just an inch or so of breathing space. As she walked out of the room, she heard the footsteps get closer. And then a knock.

When she opened the door, a number of officers, some in plain clothes, some in uniform, walked in and began looking around. She prayed silently.

"What exactly can I do for you officers today?" Karen asked, trying to calm her voice and suppress her fear that Tupac would suddenly wake up and cry loud enough to trigger curiosity. But he didn't.

The police came, they harassed, they tried to stoke fear. That's what they did back then. That's what was happening. Baby Tupac slept through some of it, but not all.

Around this time, Afeni reconnected with Mutulu Shakur. Born Jeral Williams, in his teenage years he had been mentored and heavily influenced by the life and revolutionary mind of the Shakur patriarch, Saladin, and changed his name to Mutulu Shakur. "The Shakur name represents a lot of sacrifices," Mutulu explained. "We've done as much as we can to maintain the integrity with our personal errors, with our post-traumatic stress." When Mutulu first met Afeni at various music and social events, the two became casual acquaintances. But when they reunited years after Afeni's trial, their conversations pulsed with the rush of common interests.

Mutulu was a founding member of the provisional government of the Republic of New Afrika. The organization promoted a separatist agenda, with the goal of creating "an independent Black republic" within the United States, where Black Americans could live in peace among themselves. The group also sought financial reparations for the psychological damages inflicted upon Black Americans during slavery and Jim Crow. Although Mutulu had never been a Panther, his strong interest in community affairs meant that he and Afeni moved in the same circles. Both worked with people recovering from addiction through the Lincoln Detox program and through programs such as Blacks Against Abusive Drugs (BAAD). Months later, they started to travel the country together to visit prisons and work on prison reform and inmate advocacy. As they traveled and worked for their common goals, the two became romantic. Soon Afeni became pregnant.

On October 3, 1975, when Tupac was four years old, Afeni gave birth to a baby girl. She and Mutulu named her Sekyiwa (pronounced Set-chu-wa), and suddenly they were a close-knit family of four. Tupac, proud to be a big brother, instantly became Sekyiwa's protector. He would remain so throughout his life. From the first days of Sekyiwa's life, she and Tupac were spiritually and emotionally bonded.

The growing family moved to a spacious apartment on the sixteenth floor of 626 Riverside Drive. With Mutulu's encouragement, strong African American traditions were integrated into the household. That December, the family celebrated their first Kwanzaa, an American holiday created in the African tradition just nine years before. The holiday's name comes from the Swahili phrase "Matunda Ya Kwanza," which translates to "First Fruits of the Harvest." The holiday was created for Black families to take time to put aside the commercialism of Christmas and celebrate their African roots. Afeni instilled in her children the seven principles of Kwanzaa: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.

During Kwanzaa, the family passed the Harambe cup. They prayed, blew out candles, and celebrated their new life together. These holidays instilled in Tupac a profound sense of respect for Black American culture and its connection to African tradition, but they also afforded opportunities to indulge his mischievous side during family gatherings. "Tupac used to tease all the little revolutionary girls and chase them around the house," recalled his cousin Kenny. Each night they gathered at a different house, and Tupac would instigate games like the "dozens," a verbal battle in which one cracks putdowns about someone's mother or family. Often he'd take dares from his older cousins. "I'd tell Tupac to go over there and pull one of the girls' hair," admitted Kenny. "And Tupac would always do what I told him to do."

Holiday hijinks notwithstanding, Mutulu brought paternal order to the home, and Tupac responded to the influence of this new father figure. He soon grew reluctant to join his cousins when they stirred up chaos. "I'm not allowed to" became his mantra.

And yet like so much in their lives, this moment of family bliss was temporary. Not long after the Shakur family of two became four, Mutulu and Afeni separated. Once the two parted ways, Afeni found herself with the heaviness of being a single parent on her shoulders. This time, however, the breakup was different. Since she respected Mutulu's mind and appreciated his role in the fight for freedom and equality, she decided not to cut ties. She explains the foundation of their relationship: “We were comrades and friends.” And she thought about the critical need for a paternal influence for her children and realized that Mutulu’s absence would be a detriment. She rose above the hurt and set aside her disappointment, agreeing to work with him to raise Sekyiwa and Tupac.

But even with a promise to raise the children together, Mutulu’s departure destabilized the family. Unable to make the rent alone, Afeni was evicted from their Riverside Drive apartment. Again she sought refuge. Again, Afeni confronted a failed relationship and an empty bank account. And again, her sister, Jean, was there with open arms.

With her two children in tow, Afeni moved back to the Bronx and into her sister’s apartment. Now, though, there was a new man in Jean’s life, one who would become important to Tupac’s future. Thomas Cox, known as T.C., was a train operator for the New York City Transit Authority. Never a Black Panther and not much into community service, T.C. was nonetheless a rock for Jean and for the whole family. He worked to get them on solid financial ground and willingly accepted the responsibility of feeding Afeni and her children along with his and Jean’s children from their previous marriages. The addition of Afeni, Tupac, and Sekyiwa to the household brought new financial challenges to a family already stretched to the limit, but T.C. wasn’t one to complain.

Soon after Afeni and the kids moved in, T.C. and Jean welcomed their first baby together. When Jean asked her for name recommendations, Afeni quickly went back to the list of indigenous names that she had considered when pregnant with Tupac. “I think you should name him Katari,” Afeni suggested confidently. With the addition of baby Katari to the family, 930 Thieriot Avenue was bursting. Jean smiles at the memory and says, “For the first time we were no longer in a tenement apartment. We were moving on up like the Jeffersons.”

Yet even T.C.’s hard work could not transform the family’s enduring financial hardships overnight. “We were poor,” recalls Tupac’s cousin Jamala. “We didn’t have food most of the time and we had to eat stuff like grilled cheese sandwiches with the block welfare cheese because there wasn't anything else in the refrigerator." Tupac's sandwiches, even if they didn't have any meat inside, had to be spicy. His condiment of choice, according to his cousin, was hot sauce. "He'd eat a hot-sauce sandwich if there wasn't any food in the house. As long as it was spicy, he'd eat it."

T.C. tried his best to add a bit of sunshine to these dark days. He created a game for the family: If it was "your" week, you won a chance to put your special item on the grocery list. Payday became "food day" in the Cox-Shakur household. According to Jamala, that day, usually Thursday, was "heaven." When T.C. and Jean walked through the door with food, the kids scrambled to pick their favorite item. "Mostly we ate spiced ham-and-cheese sandwiches," says Jamala, "but on a good night, chicken. As long as no one touched T.C.'s steak, everything was cool." And when T.C. worked overtime, he bought gifts for the children with the extra money. Once, T.C. surprised Tupac with a brand-new bicycle.

Despite having no money, Tupac's older cousins also figured out ways to expose themselves to the everyday fun that those with money enjoyed. On many occasions, Kenny took Tupac to Yankee Stadium, where they would sneak through a hidden entrance behind center field and into the bleachers. During the 1977 World Series, they hoped to witness what was sure to be one of the most memorable contests in baseball history—game six between the Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers. Unfortunately, stadium security was too tight. They missed a hell of a game: It was the night Reggie Jackson hit three home runs and earned the name "Mr. October." "We couldn't even get near the stadium that night," Kenny remembered. "It was fun to be outside, though, because there was so many people and it was just beautiful in New York, in the Bronx, during that time because there was so many ethnic cultures all in one area rooting for the same team." For Tupac, any disappointment about missing the game was outweighed by the thrill of various cultures mixing and mingling around the stadium. "You had Puerto Rican music over here, you had the Latin boys over there," said Kenny. "Then you had the brothas. And you had the white people. Everybody was in the same spirit of game pride. Tupac loved it. He ran around and was lovin' the excitement of it all."

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T.C., Jean, and Afeni tried to build a world of support and love for their children, but they also strove to be honest with them about the world that awaited them outside the home, a world that could be merciless, unfair, and unforgiving. That year, 1977, conversations inside the Cox-Shakur household had been increasingly dominated by the subject of ex-Panthers continuing to be unjustly targeted, harassed, and jailed. Afeni, Jean, and T.C. often discussed the fate of Assata Shakur, who, after a series of trials throughout the 1970s, now faced a life sentence for her involvement in a bloody shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike years before. The shootout had occurred late at night in May 1973, when a state trooper pulled over Sundiata Acoli for a faulty taillight. Assata's and Lumumba's brother Zayd was also in the car. After a scuffle with the police, Zayd was shot dead. In the melee, the state trooper was also shot and killed, ultimately leading to Assata's conviction for first-degree murder, assault, and robbery. That April, she was sentenced to life in prison.

Zayd was the first of the Shakur family to fall to the police, and Assata's trial, which made newspaper headlines around the world (she was represented by the famed attorney William Kunstler), left them furious with what they saw as grave miscarriages of justice and the gross, racist power of the law. Afeni did not whisper when the children were in the room. Angry conversations about "pigs" and their racist conduct were loud and unapologetic. When Mutulu visited Afeni's home to spend time with Sekyiwa and Tupac, the family discussed the unfairness of Assata's trial and how she was falsely accused. Tupac was not spared these waves of frustration and rage. He absorbed every moment, internalizing the family's ongoing emotional suffering, At a very young age, he began to develop an all-consuming distrust of authority.

The family's frustration was stoked by the constant struggle to make ends meet. Later in 1977, Afeni moved herself and the kids to a new apartment around the corner from Jean, but she quickly fell behind on rent and had to leave. They were saved thanks to the generosity of a family friend who offered an apartment on Edgecombe Avenue in Harlem. But then T.C. and Jean and their family were also evicted from their apartment on Thieriot Avenue and had to ask that same friend for a room as well. The immediate goal was for the two families to stay together just long enough to save rent money before splitting again. “We migrated everywhere,” recalled Tupac’s cousin Bill. “We had to move every six months and sometimes even more. It was hectic. I had a way to deal with it ’cause I was older than all of the others. I turned to the streets. My brothers and sisters and Tupac and little Sekyiwa, they didn’t have a way to deal with it.”

It took less than three months before Afeni was able to move again, this time back into the building on Morningside Avenue where she and Mutulu had once shared an apartment. Tupac and Sekyiwa shared a room almost barren of furniture, with only two twin beds and a lamp. The apartment may have been spare, but Afeni made sure the children had enough to feed their imaginations. Sekyiwa had a collection of doll babies that she had given all the same name, her favorite name, Nzingha. Tupac had G.I. Joes, a small collection of Hot Wheels, and various Star Wars action figures. Raised to be creative and to make do with what he had, Tupac also made his own toys, fashioning bazooka guns out of Styrofoam blocks, cardboard tubes, and tape. To stage a battleground for his bazooka war, he pitched tents in the living room and pretended they were forts. He and Sekyiwa also had a small library of children’s books. “He had all the younger versions of all those Black history books,” his older cousin Scott remembers. Tupac especially liked the children’s version of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* one of the first books he read that contained themes he was becoming very familiar with: Black nationalism, separatism, and Black pride.

At night Tupac and Sekyiwa danced in their bedroom to the songs playing from the small bedside radio, songs like “Baby, Come to Me” by Patti Austin and James Ingram. The two sang to each other and danced around the room as if they were “professional dancers,” remembered Sekyiwa. Day after day, they also created their own fantasy worlds, which included a mixture of high drama and an unapologetic sibling rivalry, as Tupac found great joy in teasing his little sister.

After school, they couldn't wait to get home and settle in in front of the television. Channel 11, WPIX, had the full lineup of Tupac's favorite shows: *Tom and Jerry, The Three Stooges, Heckle and Jeckle, Gilligan's Island, The Magilla Gorilla Show,* and *Diff'rent Strokes*. He was an active watcher, projecting himself into his favorite shows and making those worlds his own. "I could see all these people out there in this pretend world," Tupac remembered years later. "And I knew I could be part of it if I pretended too. The way Arnold used to look when he used to come out on *Diff'rent Strokes*…. So early on I just watched and emulated. And I thought maybe if I could be an actor and I could act like those characters, I could have some of their joy. If I could act like I had a big family, I wouldn't feel as lonely."

Around the time Mutulu introduced Tupac to martial arts, Tupac saw his first Bruce Lee film. He was sold. He would transform himself into the legendary actor and artist to make his own imaginary movie. "He'd jump off of our bunk beds doing flying kicks," recalled Bill. "He'd walk around the neighborhood, karate slippers on, thinkin' he was the man."

But some days he wouldn't have to live in the pretend world of Hollywood heroes. On their frequent trips across the country to the Bay Area, Afeni showed Tupac and Sekyiwa what real-life heroic efforts looked like. The kids spent days and evenings playing quietly in a law office on Valencia Street in San Francisco as Afeni continued her focus on uncovering the falsehoods in Geronimo Pratt's case. *The quest for freedom. Wrongful incarceration. Political prisoner.* All these phrases flowed from the mouths of adults into Tupac's ears. He found himself wide-eyed and captivated at Free Geronimo Pratt rallies, joining in the chanting:

Geronimo Pratt
Be like he
Dare to struggle
to be free

Even though Sekyiwa and Tupac were raised in the flux of instability, no matter how much money they didn't have, or how long the days were, or how defeated Afeni felt, she never let up on keeping her children's education, maintaining a strict disciplinary regimen and consistent homeschooling lessons that supplemented their public school education. No matter if she'd just flown back from California after a month-long legal research trip or if she was simply just exhausted from organizing tenant strikes to improve housing conditions in New York's needy communities, she made time to prioritize their learning. But there were days when Tupac didn't feel like adhering to his mother's rules and expectations. Depending on the infraction, his misbehavior usually resulted in one of two methods of punishment: a beating to the backside or being forced to sit at the kitchen table and read *The New York Times* aloud, from the front page to the back. He dreaded the latter penalty, and rebelled with dramatic gestures and excessive whining through every sentence. It didn't matter. Afeni believed that this form of punishment, along with her personally tailored homeschool curriculum, would eventually pay off, and it did, in ways both immediate and far-reaching. For example, while in third grade at P.S. 28, in social studies class, Tupac stunned his teacher with his precocious ability when he penned a short essay about Black female leaders in history.

That was a good day. Other days, his mischief ran free. In art class one afternoon, when given an assignment to sculpt with clay, Tupac gathered that he was free to construct anything. There were no taboos in this class. Free and creative expression was the hallmark. Feeling rebellious and daring as usual, he embarked on a special design: the perfect penis. At the end of the school day, he proudly carried his creation to the Black History assembly in the gymnasium, where he planned to do a little "show and tell." As he steadily raised his hand to answer trivia questions that the teachers asked the student audience, he poked the prominent tip of his sculpture into an unsuspecting classmate named Iris. Eventually, she had enough and turned him in. The result was a daylong suspension.

Tupac knew he was in for it when Afeni found out. Terrified of what his mother's punishment would be for an offense of this magnitude, he left school, hopped on the train, and rode around New York for the rest of the afternoon. On his fourth or fifth trip back and forth to Queens, a white couple noticed something wasn't right and took him to the police station.

An officer from the Queens precinct called Afeni and informed her that they had her son. She bolted out of the house and jumped on the train. She couldn't make it from Harlem to Queens fast enough. She had no idea what to expect—she didn't know whether they had Tupac in handcuffs or locked in a cell. All she knew was that her son, a young Black boy, was being held until she arrived.

To her utter disbelief, when she walked into the station, she found Tupac completely relaxed, his legs propped up on a policeman's desk, watching *Welcome Back, Kotter* on the precinct's television. He seemed to know that he was safer anywhere other than his home, where his mother's ire surely awaited him. Afeni, in her heart, couldn't believe that her son had escaped potential punishment by seeking refuge in the house of the enemy. In her mind, she and all Black people in the country were at war against the police!

As Afeni ushered Tupac out of the station, clearly steaming, the policemen bid them farewell. One couldn't resist adding, "Go easy on him."

Skip Notes

[*] According to the *Los Angeles Times,* it was discovered that "in January 1970 and again in June 1970, FBI memos stated that he was to be 'neutralized as an effective BPP [Black Panther Party] functionary' and that 'the legitimacy of Pratt's BPP authority is to be challenged' by COINTELPRO operation #1. That October, the FBI and the LAPD, working together, began manipulating evidence against Pratt for the Olsen murder. By December, he was indicted and arrested." Twenty-seven years after Pratt was convicted, the case was overturned when it was proven that Julio Butler was a convicted felon who was a paid FBI and police informant recruited to infiltrate the Panther Party.

03

THE STREETZ R DEATHROW

1975–1980

> Growing up as an inner-city brother, where every other had a pops and a mother, I was the product of a heated lover
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

Tupac grew up not knowing who his father was, and perhaps because of that he grew up with many fathers. Each of them offered a different kind of instruction in life, in what it meant to be a man. As Tupac matured into a young man, Mutulu Shakur, Legs Saunders, and Thomas “T.C.” Cox all assumed influential and critical roles, each impressing a different set of values that manifested as intricate and visible pieces of Tupac’s character.

Legs became Tupac’s father almost by default. From the time Tupac was old enough to understand, he yearned to know who his biological father was. When he asked Afeni, she was honest. She told him it was either Legs Saunders or Billy Garland. Tupac didn’t know who Billy Garland was. So he appointed Legs his father.

Legs was the only man whom Tupac ever called Dad. From him Tupac quickly learned the fundamentals of street life. “[Legs,] my stepfather, was a gangster,” he later recalled. “A straight-up street hustler. He didn’t even care if Mom had a kid. He was like, ‘Oh, that’s my son.’…Took care of me, gave me money, but he was like a criminal too. He was a drug dealer out there doing his thing. He only came, brought me money…” But then he left. Afeni remembered Legs as a soldier. “Legs was a soldier in the street,” she said. “I was a soldier in the army.”

When Tupac was around ten years old, Legs reappeared. He showed up at their apartment, excited to take his “son” out for the day. The two often cruised around the streets of Harlem in Legs’s late-model Buick, whiling away hours shopping up and down 125th Street, checking out the latest fashion trends. Sometimes they'd spend all day at Games People Play, an arcade that Legs frequented. Trips to the barbershop and buckets of fried chicken became routine. Legs dubbed Tupac "Big Head." One day, after a day out with Legs, Tupac ran into the apartment with a brand-new boom box. It was black and silver, with a heavy-duty metal carrying bar, extra-large woofer speakers, and a dual cassette player. Tupac relished the gift, since aside from a few pieces of clothing, it was the only gift he ever received from Legs. It was a happy time. Tupac usually returned home with a new outfit or a pair of shoes, always a fresh haircut and a smile that lasted for days.

One day Tupac returned with his hair cropped and blown out. Cousin Bill was sitting on the couch when Tupac walked in. "Damn! What you do to your hair?" Bill asked.

"Dad hooked me up."

Afeni gave Tupac a once-over and chimed in, "Yeah, that's all right, but please don't let him put those chemicals in your hair like you came home with last time!" Afeni didn't approve of the "unnatural" chemical 'dos that Legs encouraged—no Jheri curls or perms were allowed. But most of Afeni's demands fell gently by the wayside after she realized that Legs and Tupac's time alone together, as father and son, was much more important than her feelings about a Jheri curl.

Sometimes Legs would stay with them at the apartment for days at a time. At the breakfast table each morning, he would ritualistically pop a colorful array of vitamins and supplements. The children listened with rapt attention as he offered detailed explanations of the benefits of cod liver oil and the positive effects of bee pollen. They begged for their own doses. Such was their admiration for this man who sought to make them stronger through lessons in nutrition and wellness.

Legs's stays gave Tupac hope, a false hope perhaps, that this "dad" might become a permanent fixture in his life. But Legs never stuck around consistently. He came in and out of the family's life like a radio signal. In the end, his fleeting presence only contributed to Tupac's growing disappointment over the absence of a stable father in his life.

Jean's second husband, T.C., was another critical paternal influence. In contrast to Legs, who introduced Tupac to street life, T.C. modeled structure and reliability. He created a sense of routine for the kids, returning from work each night at the same time, earning regular paychecks, and enjoying free time on the weekends. In T.C., Tupac finally had a father figure he could *expect* things from, someone who showed that with hard work came positive results. Afeni attributed the strong work ethic that Tupac developed in his teens to her brother-in-law.

There were many instances in Tupac's childhood when he tried to emulate his uncle. Like T.C., he wanted to take care of and be the "protector" of the family. He practiced with his baby sister. He was sweet and gentle with her, displaying an inherent sensitivity that would become characteristic of his personality. Whether it was Sekyiwa or a neighborhood child, Tupac frequently ran to the aid of those in need. Cousin Jamala remembered a day when six-year-old Tupac and the cousins returned home from school to find Moniqua, a four-year-old neighbor, despondent and in tears on her front stoop. While the rest of the kids walked past without stopping, Tupac sat down next to Moniqua and comforted her. "It will all be okay, Moniqua," Jamala remembered him saying in a soft voice. He wiped Moniqua's tears from her face. "I promise you. Just tell me what happened? Who did it? Tell me why you're crying."

Mutulu instituted a different and compelling set of ideals. From Mutulu, Tupac got a crash course in Young Black Male 101. Mutulu also taught Tupac and Sekyiwa about the dichotomous nature of Black American mindsets—the assimilators and the separatists. He explained the concepts of colonialism and imperialism, and discussed how America's fixation on exclusivity, restricting the progress of Black Americans through oppression, was built into the fabric of its capitalistic power structure. Mutulu supplemented Afeni's lessons on Black America's past and present leaders by dissecting their various philosophies and critically analyzing their influence.

Another lesson Mutulu shared with the children was the importance of loving and respecting one's mind and body, something he incorporated into his practice as a healer and acupuncturist. Every morning he'd sit the kids down for stretching sessions. "He'd make me and Tupac do karate kicks and sit-ups every morning to keep our stomach area tight," recalled cousin Kenny. Sekyiwa was proud of her father's accomplishments in acupuncture medicine, telling everyone that her father was a "doctor."

As the years passed, though time would take them to different places, Mutulu became one of Tupac's great teachers. Mutulu was the man Tupac went to throughout his life for advice. "Every problem and every issue that Tupac went through, that was his mentor," Afeni explained. "Everything. Mutulu and Geronimo."

Tupac took pride in his Shakur lineage early in life. With Afeni's community activism and Mutulu's accomplishments in the medical realm, Tupac learned as a young boy that community and leadership were synonymous with his last name. But the pride he felt didn't come without conflict. Even in his youth, Tupac was not immune to the media's consistently negative coverage of the Shakurs and their revolutionary brethren. On TV and on the radio, he heard brothers and sisters in solidarity, family and friends, described as enemies of the state. Tupac had to grasp how those his mother loved and respected could be portrayed as criminals.

By the time he was eight, these fatherly relationships had developed in Tupac a complex dual consciousness. Afeni's and Mutulu's educational lessons instilled in him a revolutionary vigilance against a system complicit in keeping Black Americans powerless and poor. On the other hand, Legs schooled him in the conduct and competitiveness of the street hustle. The intricacies of Tupac's pre-adolescent intellect were shaped into a two-sided coin, with knowledge and distrust on one side, street survival on the other. This combination would mark him for the rest of his life, transforming into the raw and zealous essence that inspired the compelling poetry and lyrics he would eventually share with the world.

Though Legs and Mutulu each had a great influence on Tupac's life and mind, the actual face-to-face time they spent with him was relatively slight. Legs was mostly gone. And Mutulu would become physically absent from the family when the life of the Shakur clan took another dark turn.

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On November 2, 1979, Assata Shakur escaped from the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women. Federal agents combed the streets of New York trying to find her. They believed the prison break was orchestrated by the Black Liberation Army, and they hunted anyone and everyone connected with the notorious escape. The FBI considered Mutulu a suspect. When he disappeared and went underground, the homes Sekyiwa and Tupac lived in during this time became a target for a stakeout and surveillance.

Another siege, really a manhunt. And this time, if there were any confrontations, there would be young children involved. Afeni reverted to Panther mode, defenses up, ready to protect her kids at any cost. With the FBI literally in her backyard, Afeni began to add lectures on crisis control to her children's daily lessons. She demanded constant vigilance from Tupac, instructing him sternly each morning as she left for work. As the young, wide-eyed Tupac stared up at his mother, she'd order, "Pay close attention to every situation happening around you, at all times." Tupac listened intently. "And most importantly, trust *no one*!" And then she'd slip out the door, leaving Tupac with these lasting urgent warnings and commands, wondering how to prioritize them in his day ahead.

These lessons in situational awareness carried over into every aspect of their lives. From that point, everybody, no matter what role they would play in Tupac's life, would be questioned. One afternoon, Tupac was catching fly balls in his housing community's courtyard when he dived for a grounder and smacked his face hard on the side of a concrete bench. He was rushed to Lincoln Hospital, where he was met by Afeni, determined to protect him not only from pain but from any attempt by the doctors to harm him. The paranoia she had felt on the day of his birth in the New York Flower–Fifth Avenue Hospital had returned in force.

In the emergency room, Tupac lay strapped to a gurney, ready for treatment, but Afeni quickly halted the doctor's plans to inject him with anesthesia. She demanded that they remove the straps from her son's arms. She recalled telling the doctor, sternly and adamantly, "What you must do, mister, is explain to my son what you are about to do to him. He is not an animal." Tupac stared up at her in pain as she lambasted the doctor, demanding that he justify fastening Tupac down in such a forceful way. Dramatic experiences like this taught young Tupac much about trust and distrust, and further bonded him to Afeni. Whether or not he understood the extent of her fear, he knew she was his protector.

Once Tupac's stitches healed, Afeni expanded her overarching plan to prepare him for his future. She had given him a strong foundation and sense of identity, one that was centered on tradition, pride, and history lessons. Now she stepped up the lessons on vigilance. She would foster in her son a warrior-like mentality so he could defend himself against police, or anyone out to cause him harm.

She enrolled him in the Black Cipher Academy, a karate school in Harlem owned by her friend and fellow former Panther Jamal Joseph. The school offered education for the body and the mind: For $5 a month, Jamal gave his students karate instruction, a comprehensive political education, and lessons in Black history. On his first day of class, Tupac arrived in uniform: black karate gi pants and a red T-shirt. Posters of Malcolm X and Che Guevara lined the wall of the dojo. Tupac took to it instantly. His confidence grew week by week. He didn't hesitate to ask Sensei Jamal if he could spar against the older students. One day, Jamal assented to such a match, watching as the two practiced their fighting technique. Then all of a sudden the older kid cracked Tupac with a swift kick to the face. His nose started to bleed.

Jamal interrupted the battle. "Okay, Tupac, you can bow now, that's it."

Tupac's "game face" never wavered. He ignored Jamal and kept sparring.

Again, Jamal tried to end the match. "Bow, Tupac."

Tupac still didn't break focus. "No, Sensei, I gotta finish the match."

The fight continued. Blood from Tupac's nose spattered onto the mat as he fought on. Only after he and his opponent had exhausted themselves did Tupac take his final bow and make his way to the back of the school, where Jamal tended to his bloody nose. "Tupac was always the most enthusiastic kid in the class," Jamal recalled. "He would never quit. He always wanted to spar the bigger kids….He had this great laugh that made you just want to grab him and flip him and tickle him just so you could get to hear that laugh and feel his energy. He had an incredible spirit."

Some of the kids would stay after class to help tidy up the dojo. Tupac always took out the garbage and wiped down the mirrors. It seemed to be a fair exchange for the class fee, which Afeni couldn't afford. Tupac would routinely ask Jamal if there was anything else he could help with.

"No, that's all right, Tupac. You can go home."

With a smile and a bow, he'd slip out the door.

At that age, karate lessons were fun and social. But as Tupac sharpened his skills, his mother continued to remind him that his hard work at the dojo served a deeper purpose. Tupac began to understand that he was more or less in training, and that ultimately he might have to use his body as a weapon of defense. These lessons from Afeni, the constant suspicions and questions, the intimations that he needed to be prepared to fight for his life, slowly transferred a paranoid mindset from mother to son. Her war—the one she waged on the streets with the Panthers and unknowingly against the FBI, the one that refused to stand down when Black lives were under siege—would, for better or worse, become his as well.

—

As a new decade arrived, authorities turned up the heat in their search for Assata Shakur, putting ever greater pressure on her friends and associates. Fearing an all-out federal raid, Afeni decided it was best to move once again. As luck would have it, an apartment was available across the hall from where Jean and T.C. were living. The building was located at 1838 Seventh Avenue in Harlem. It was built with an array of architectural intricacies, including a set of ornate pillars that framed an inviting entryway. It was a perfect space for children who lived in the building and around the neighborhood to hang out on hot summer days. Here, Tupac and his cousins passed their time, playing catch, eating ice-cream cones, and jumping rope.

Still, Afeni was determined never to let Tupac get complacent. When she left for work each morning, she reminded Tupac that if he was going to spend time hanging outside with his cousins and friends, he needed to remain watchful and on guard. She warned him to keep an eye out for suspicious strangers poking around the neighborhood, especially white men in dark suits. Tupac, at ten years old, became a sentinel.

One afternoon, Tupac forgot. He got lost in the summer day, playing outside with the neighborhood kids, and failed to notice two men in suits approach their building and follow Sekyiwa and one of their cousins up the stairs to their apartment. When the girls got to the fifth floor, they finally realized someone was following them and turned around, positioning themselves in front of their door.

They asked the strangers if they could help them find something.

"Yes, we're looking for 5F."

Five-year-old Sekyiwa wasn't quite aware of the danger that lay ahead and told them, "That's where we live."

The FBI agent asked, "Oh? Where's your mom?"

Sekyiwa spoke up, "She's at the Union."

The men asked, "And where's your dad?"

Sekyiwa only repeated what she knew. "He's underground."

Afeni learned about the visit as soon as she returned home that evening and grew furious with her son. Tupac had neglected his duties. The guilt was tremendous. Even though Afeni spanked him, it was her scorching, reproachful stare that burned his soul. For days, that stare stifled every bit of his youthful humor and lightheartedness. "He always had that responsibility," recalled Sekyiwa. "And I carried the responsibility of his heart. He was the oldest of us, and he had the responsibility of protecting, being the man. My responsibility, in my mind, was to make sure he was okay."

Just months later, in October, the family received devastating news. Police had linked Mutulu to a botched holdup of a Brink's truck at the

Nanuet National Bank in Nyack, New York, in which a Brink's guard and two Nyack policemen were killed. Now, just like Assata, Mutulu was on the run. Authorities had long claimed he was implicated in Assata's escape, but this time he was wanted for robbery and murder.

Tupac was torn. He believed that Mutulu was innocent. He also believed that Zayd and Assata were innocent. But the TV told another story: Mutulu, the man he had long admired and loved, would soon appear on the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted Fugitives" list.

The danger seemed to draw nearer. When a close family friend was arrested for failing to supply the authorities with information about the botched Brink's truck robbery, Afeni and Jean feared what the authorities would do to their friend, or even to them, if they found the family's fingerprints inside the friend's home.

T.C. was no revolutionary, but his practical mind reached for a plan. With the children in tow, he went over to the apartment. Once inside, he gave each of the kids a jar of peanut butter, and instructed them to cover the counters, walls, and doorknobs—anywhere they thought there might be fingerprints. As Tupac strategically spread the peanut butter on the kitchen countertops, T.C. commanded, "Make sure you get every space!" The children eagerly followed his direction, feeling heroic and unafraid.

It was an intense life for the children. "We lived in a tumultuous time," Tupac's cousin Scott remembered. "Everyone, especially the adults, they were so into what they believed in that there wasn't a whole lot of attention placed on us as children. Not to say that there was neglect. But there was just so much going on. We were exposed to so much of their lives being what they didn't want it to be. They had such big dreams. They were coming out of the '60s and entering the '70s. Vietnam was about to be over. People were just stuck in a bunch of shit that they just couldn't understand."

As an adult, Tupac voiced his concern about the Shakur name and wondered if he, too, would be cursed by it. "In my family every Black male with the last name of Shakur that ever passed the age of fifteen has either been killed or put in jail," Tupac said in a deposition when he was twenty-four years old. “There are no Shakurs, Black male Shakurs, out right now, free, breathing, without bullet holes in them or cuffs on his hands. None.”

04

NOTHIN BUT LOVE

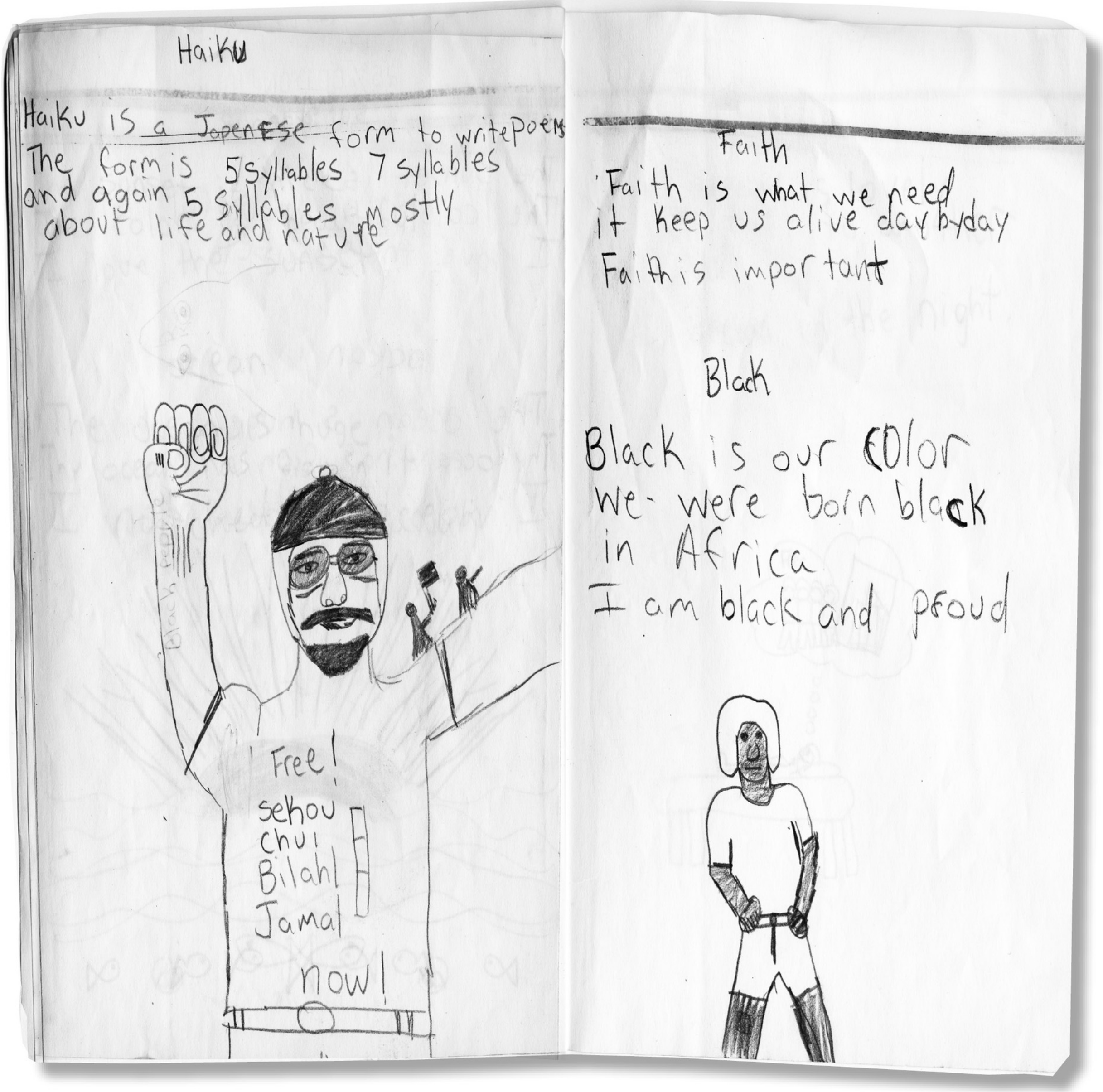
1981–1984

> Panthers, Pimps, Pushers, and Thugs…
> Hey yo, that's my family tree, I got nothin but love.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

Between nightly news reports about Mutulu and Assata, and the constant fear of the FBI and the police circulating through every conversation that loomed, Tupac tried to create a safe haven from the reality of his family's revolutionary life. Poetry became one of his creative outlets, just like it was his mother's.

At the age of eleven, Tupac learned from Mutulu about the intricacies of haiku, a Japanese poetic form. He was fascinated by its 5-7-5 meter and started to craft his own poems. Some were about faith, some about sunsets and the ocean. Some were about Black pride. His most powerful haiku, though, were those about his dreams for the men he knew were imprisoned, dreams for them to be "free." They were about those his mother told him were wrongly incarcerated, men like Mutulu Shakur, Jamal Joseph, Geronimo Pratt, and Sekou Odinga. Once, he wrote a book of haiku to send to Jamal while he was incarcerated. Channeling his early passion for social justice, a belief that encompassed freedom for all Black people in America, he signed it, "Tupac Shakur—Future Freedom Fighter." Freedom not only from wrongful imprisonment but also from racism, oppression, and police brutality. Before he was even a teen, Tupac knew his path.

Fighting for social justice was not the only lesson Afeni instilled in her children. She also believed it was important to explore different faiths. One Sunday, she took them to the service at the House of the Lord Church in Brooklyn. The congregation was led by Reverend Herbert Daughtry, an activist minister who supported political prisoners and the liberation struggle. On their first visit, Daughtry asked them to approach the pulpit so he could welcome the new family. When he asked a young Tupac what he wanted to be when he grew up, Tupac quickly and proudly answered, “I want to be a revolutionary.”



Haiku

Haiku is a Japenese form to write poems
The form is 5 syllables 7 syllables
and again 5 syllables mostly
about life and nature

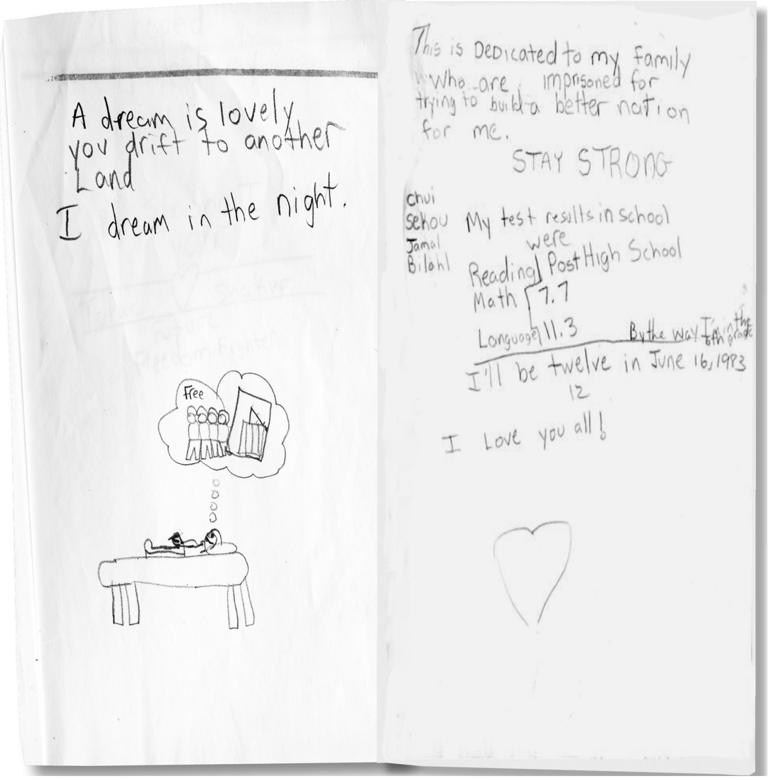
Black people
Free!
Sekou
Chui
Bilahl
Jamal
now!

Faith

Faith is what we need
it keep us alive day by day
Faith is important

Black

Black is our color
we were born black
in Africa
I am black and proud



A dream is lovely
you drift to another
Land
I dream in the night.

This is Dedicated to my family
Who are imprisoned for
trying to build a better nation
for me.

STAY STRONG

Chui
Sekou
Jamal
Bilahl

My test results in school
were
Reading Post High School
Math 7.7
Language 11.3
By the way I'm in the 6th grade
I'll be twelve in June 16, 1983
12

I Love you all!

Following the traditional Japanese haiku form, Tupac wrote this book of poetry and sent it to his godfather, Jamal Joseph, during his incarceration in 1981.

Click here to view as text

He also began to study songs on the radio. Using the beatbox that Legs bought him, he'd tape-record his favorites, like Bob Marley's "Exodus," to play over and over again. He appreciated the music, but he was fixated by the lyrics. When songs came on the radio, he'd always ask his cousins what they thought the songwriter meant by the lyrics. He listened intently to each word of every song, music from all genres. He especially liked the lyrics from the Black country-folk song "Patches," by Clarence Carter, about a young boy whose dying father depended on him to take care of the family:

Patches, I'm dependin' on you, son
To pull the family through
My son, it's all left up to you

Tupac's own first song, entitled "First Step," was inspired by the television show *Fame*'s theme of dreams and the performing arts. He wrote the song around the age of eleven, during a "pretend" recording session with Sekyiwa and his cousins:

You're looking at a dream
You're starin' it in the eye
You're scared to take a chance
You're in for a surprise
Takin the first step, the first step
It's the hardest step to take
Waiting for the day, come what may.

Movies were another escape for Tupac. He and Sekyiwa and their cousins would often spend weekends roaming New York, catching films. Tupac always hoped to find a theater showing a Bruce Lee movie. "We'd stay there all day long in the theater," remembered family friend Malcolm Greenidge. "And Pac would come out of the theater and swear he knew every move. He knew it. He was the expert." Tupac never shied away from proudly demonstrating his karate moves for passersby on the sidewalks. "And if you try to do it, Pac was like, 'Naw, that wasn't how they did it. They did it like this.' "

At home at night, childhood imaginations flourished. Tupac, Sekyiwa, and the cousins were doctors, TV actors and singers, and hide-and-seekers. They built maze-like forts out of chairs and blankets. They played hospital, splattering Red Zinger tea on the injured patient to ensure a bloody special effect. They reenacted scenes from their favorite TV shows, arguing over who got to be the good guy and who had to be the bad guy. Tupac was always the casting director. If they were doing *The A-Team,* Tupac always had to be team leader John "Hannibal" Smith. Katari was assigned the helicopter pilot, H.M. "Howling Mad" Murdock; Malcolm was tough guy Bosco Albert "B.A." Baracus; and Yafeu Fula (the youngest of the crew) was Templeton Peck, the Faceman, the master of disguise. Sekyiwa was always “the damsel in distress.” They drew pictures of guns on cardboard, cut them out, and used them in their shootouts. Tupac, of course, even directed everyone exactly where and how they had to die. Malcolm recalled, “Every time we finished one of our ‘missions,’ Tupac would quote one of Hannibal’s signature sayings: ‘I love it when a plan comes together.’ ”

One of their favorite pastimes was to stage their own concerts and sing for the family. Sometimes Sekyiwa questioned why Tupac always got to be Prince or Ralph Tresvant. And when she’d try to challenge him, or make an attempt to be the lead singer, or ask him if she could run the show, he wouldn’t back down. Tupac would come back with, “Do you get us gigs? Do you write down lyrics? Do you miss class because you’re writing down songs? All right then, shut up!”

As soon as Tupac heard that Afeni or Aunt Jean planned to have friends come over to visit, he seized the opportunity for a captive audience. Right away, he would get to work planning an impromptu production that would take place in the living room once the company arrived. He would gather the cousins in a room, assign each of them a character, and give them their lines. He demanded excellence. If they failed to follow his direction, he’d ask them do it again until he thought it was right.

Tupac gracefully navigated his sorrow as a young child by hanging outside with the neighborhood kids, teasing his sister, and channeling all his emotion into creative outlets. But even after a fun-filled day of pulling sidewalk pranks, playing baseball, and performing skits, sometimes Tupac’s young mind swirled at night, and he’d get lost in his thoughts. Sometimes he would lie in bed, sad, with tears, as he listened to James Ingram’s “Just Once.” Afeni recounts, “It was his favorite song. His anthem. His little spirit, you know: Just once, can we try to get it right?”

Just once, can we figure out what we keep doin’ wrong…

Sekyiwa recalls, “We were sad children. Some people can say ‘We were poor, but we were happy.’ But we couldn’t say that.”

The relationship between Tupac and his sister was strengthened by their sharing of the most rich and sentimental of life's experiences. With his cousins, he shared an unbridled sense of competition, their bond based on a never-ending battle of high-wire wit, especially with his cousin Jamala, who was closest in age. Tupac, the spelling wiz of the family, could not wait to initiate a spelling bee, and usually Jamala would be the first one he'd choose to challenge. The problem was, she was not at all concerned about the spelling of the uncommon three-syllable words he threw at her. Her home education hadn't been nearly as stringent as Tupac's, and she certainly was never forced to read *The New York Times*.

"Okay, Jamala, come on. I bet you can't spell 'harpsichord,' " Tupac would say.

"Whatever Pah-kee. And who cares about spelling 'harpsichord' anyway?" Jamala snapped.

"You're just mad 'cause you can't spell it."

"H-A-R-P-S-C-O-R-D."

Tupac laughed boisterously, "See, I told you!"

"Who cares!" Jamala snapped back. "That's why your mother was in jail!"

With Jamala, the verbal battles were innocent, as Tupac's primary objective was simply to prove that he knew more than she did. With his sister, other cousins, and friends, he sometimes wore them out with his antics, which often featured demanding but stimulating provisions. When they were still in elementary school, he'd often dare them to a quick game of cowboys and Indians, always finding a way to manipulate the game so that he'd be the last cowboy standing.

As Jean's older sons, Bill Jr. and Kenny, aged out of living at home, two younger kids moved in. Close friend Louisa Tyler routinely dropped off her son Malcolm to spend the week so that he could walk to and attend school with his best friend, Katari. And Yaasmyn Fula's son, Yafeu, went from a periodic to a permanent presence in the circle as well. The six younger children—Jamala, Tupac, Sekyiwa, Katari, Malcolm, and Yafeu—shuttled back and forth from one apartment to the other, playing whatever their ringleader, Tupac, suggested. It was Tupac's world. His unabashed leadership had burgeoned and by the time he was twelve had become his quintessence.

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While the kids were at school, Afeni immersed herself in the world of social reform. For years now, she had gone head-to-head with slumlords to help families overcome the challenges and sometimes horrors of unfit housing. She'd advocated for children with rat bites on their faces and helped families with complaints of roaches crawling into their children's ears while they slept at night. She learned how to attack a problem head-on and, as a result, make progress. Each victory fueled her forward, one unfit condition at a time.

Education reform was also a component of Afeni's agenda. Specifically, she pushed for change to the American standard curriculum. She was appalled that her children still weren't learning in school about Black history, about the inequities of their people's past, and about leaders other than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She created strategies for the New York public school district to recruit Black principals.

Through this work, she came across the Lower East Side School. The school was set up in a run-down building in the Bowery neighborhood, but it had a solid reputation for providing a well-rounded, diversified curriculum in elementary education. Afeni used every single penny she had to enroll Sekyiwa, who would start in second grade, and Tupac, in sixth. Malcolm and Katari would attend as well.

Tupac excelled. "The kids really liked their teacher, Mr. Lincoln," Jean recalled. "And Tupac also had a math teacher, an African man with a heavy accent. It made such a difference, our kids having two Black male teachers. Two great role models."

Their time at the school was unfortunately short-lived, but it led to an important connection. Shortly after the academic year was under way, Mr. Lincoln was fired. Afeni and Jean thought the administration had decided

Lincoln and his curriculum were too progressive: In his late twenties, he wore dreadlocks and taught the children about Black history, specifically Malcolm X and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Out of shock and frustration—and channeling the protesting spirit he absorbed from his mother—Tupac asked Afeni if he could organize a one-day boycott of classes to demonstrate the students' appreciation of Mr. Lincoln, a request that had her beaming with pride. Tupac, Sekyiwa, and the cousins took a bold line with the school: They wouldn't return unless Mr. Lincoln was rehired. Sadly, their efforts proved ineffective, and without hesitation, Afeni and Jean pulled the kids out.

But they were not ready to give up on Mr. Lincoln. They put to him a proposition: If he started his own school, they would sign on with all five children. He quickly turned his apartment into a classroom and signed on a few more students, and within weeks, Mr. Lincoln's school was in session. Even though they'd moved from a traditional to a homeschool setting, discipline in his classroom was strictly enforced. Malcolm remembered, "Even though I liked Mr. Lincoln, I didn't like him, because you know when you fucked up, he used to knock us on [the] head."

Such closeness in the classroom encouraged the children's sense of family and security. They walked to school together, studied together, and ate lunch together. On weekends, they roamed the Harlem streets as a group, asserting more independence as they got older. Sekyiwa remembered those times warmly. "All of us would walk over to 125th and eat. Tupac would get the same thing every single day. He used his two single dollar bills for the same thing. The fried crab legs and fish-stick special. And then after school, we'd always walk to Central Park and waste the afternoon away. The guys would see if they could find any crawfish to catch. We'd bring them home to keep as pets."

Jamala, too, remembered days walking through Harlem, the entire group outfitted in kufis or kente cloth, clothes that conveyed pride in their African heritage, in being Black. But Tupac felt torn between his family and the neighborhood kids, many of whom lacked a sense of that deeper heritage and mocked them for their seemingly strange garb. This constant ridicule from peers made them sad and confused. “Here comes the tribe!” people would whisper mockingly as they passed by. “Nobody was hip then,” Jamala recalled. “We had African names and we celebrated Kwanzaa. We were always teased by the chicks on the block with names like Lisa and Danielle and Brittany.” It didn’t matter, though. Tupac and his “tribe” pushed on, trying their best to keep their heads high and hold close to their heart everything they’d learned from the adults in their world: Know where you came from. Know who you are. And know where you are going.

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Across a full decade of nonstop activism, the disappointments in Afeni’s life piled up. Her comrades were all in jail, murdered, or on the run. Those she trusted were gone. Those she loved had hurt her. As the years flew by, it took a toll, sapping her strength. She needed a break from the constant worry and fears about the future.

When Tupac was almost twelve years old, Legs reappeared and offered Afeni that break. He would roll in after a night in the local bars around Harlem, always past midnight, crawl into bed, and wake Afeni with a freshly rolled marijuana joint or a bottle of liquor. As she got used to the steady routine of his late-night wake-ups, one night he offered her cocaine in a glass pipe. He urged her to try it, feeding it to a soul who felt lost inside a life even more precarious than the one she led as a teen. A vicious pattern of late-night drug-use visits developed.

By 1982, freebasing, smoking rocks of cocaine, had crashed like a wave into the inner cities of America and was quickly becoming a back-alley urban trend. Dealers stretched their supply of coke through a new and innovative method of cooking the powdery substance into rocks, which ultimately lowered the drug’s price. Cocaine was no longer just the pastime of the white and the wealthy; access to its pleasures and its dangers spread to the masses, with painful consequences for those who could least afford them. The demand spread east from California to the boroughs of New York, where it found the disillusioned, dispirited Afeni.

Despite looming clouds of uncertainty and discontent, the family forged ahead. Afeni continued to smoke with Legs, on occasion, for months, with no visible disruption to her life. She considered her drug use recreational. She and the children clung to their dreams for a better life. They were still sponges for any and all cultural experiences and events. That summer they went to Harlem's Jazzmobile concerts, held in a different location each week. Afeni also continued to introduce her children to a wide variety of foods—African, Japanese, Brazilian, and Jamaican. "We ate our way through New York," she explained. "No matter how much money we had we always did things. For us, poverty was going to be a temporary situation."

Shortly after Legs moved in, he was arrested again and sent back to jail. As a result, Tupac faced not only another sudden absence of his "dad" but also another eviction. Now that some of Afeni's paycheck would, at times, go to her drug habit, money grew sparse. When Tupac asked his mother why they didn't have enough money for rent, to keep their lights on, or to buy groceries, Afeni's reply was simple. Speaking of her misplaced priorities—her all-consuming activist efforts that interrupted her ability to keep a steady income stream for her family, and her choice to sometimes use her paychecks to buy drugs—she answered by saying, "Because of the poor decisions I made." Tupac was always forgiving. By then it was already natural for him to shoulder the responsibility. By then he'd promised them that one day he was going to make enough money to take care of them. His sense of duty and his confidence in his future worth grew from his mother's belief and constant reminder to her children that their situation was only temporary.

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After a series of discussions, Jean and T.C. decided to leave the city for a new start in the suburbs. Jean scanned the newspaper for houses to rent and found one she liked in White Plains, an hour train ride from Manhattan. "That was us trying to expose our kids to better things. Better schools.

Better this. Better that," Jean remembered. "So our friend Bob Boyle, an attorney that we knew, rented us a car. Afeni and I drove an hour out of the city to see the house. I had never been to White Plains. Most Black people went to Yonkers and Mount Vernon, not Westchester County." By then, it would have been incomprehensible for Afeni and Jean to live farther than an apartment unit away from each other, let alone a city block, so Afeni and the two kids would move to Westchester too.

With a population of approximately forty thousand, White Plains had streets that were tree-lined, and its neighborhoods were as safe as they were quiet. No dirty sidewalks. No loud sirens wailing through the night. But most important, no more cramped, walk-up tenement apartments.

The two-story, five-bedroom house at 2 Carrigan Avenue was in the middle of a predominantly Jewish and Italian neighborhood. When they moved in, Afeni and Jean hoped the suburbs would provide a sense of stability that they had never known, not in Lumberton and not in the Bronx or Harlem. "Afeni, just like Tupac, hated poverty," said Jean. "She never liked that her mother was poor and that that's what we came from. She was never comfortable because she knew she could do better." Afeni and the kids set up their living quarters on the first level. Tupac had his own space, a partitioned-off bedroom with one wall painted blue and the rest a natural-wood paneling. It was his designated area, a corner of the world for him to lay his head in this foreign land of suburbia.

In a town without diversity, the Shakurs and Coxes set up their new lives, hoping to blend in without anyone noticing they didn't fit into the white, middle-class demographic. It wasn't always an easy fit. "The family moved to White Plains, where we shouldn't have moved because we couldn't afford it," Kenny recalled. "But because my mother, my aunt, and my father wanted the best they could do for us, they tried to move us to a big house in upstate New York where rich white people live at and there's only one Black person in the whole town. We were not supposed to be there. But we were there."

Afeni enrolled Tupac in White Plains Middle School. Unlike everywhere else Tupac and Sekyiwa had ever been to school, the student body was, like the town, mostly white. Tupac was unbothered by the difference and quickly made friends with a classmate named Jesse, who was white and Native American. Jesse and his family embraced Tupac right away. The two were fast friends—fast enough for Tupac to attend the memorial service for Jesse's grandmother. He watched with interest as the adults passed around a pipe to smoke her ashes, a Native American tradition that captured his imagination. Later in life, he would often talk about having this ritual performed for him when he passed away.

Not long after the family settled into their new neighborhood, Tupac applied for his first job: delivering newspapers. Although managing a neighborhood paper route demonstrated Tupac's forging ahead into the land of responsibility and adulthood, Afeni made sure he knew he wasn't too old for a good old-fashioned punishment when he stepped out of line.

One day the family made plans to go to a new friend's home for a cookout. Afeni had just bought Sekyiwa a pair of brand-new white Nikes with a bright pink swoosh, but as she was getting ready to go, Tupac snatched one of the shoes and ran. Sekyiwa chased him through the house and outside. He threw her shoe onto the roof and waited for it to roll down so he could catch it, but it got stuck. They didn't own a ladder. Sekyiwa wasted no time telling her mother. Since the days of butt-whuppins and *New York Times* reading sessions were long gone, Afeni had to come up with new punishments that fit each household crime accordingly. In this case, the crime warranted a very long walk—all the way to the cookout, many miles away. Afeni and Sekyiwa drove off, leaving Tupac standing on the sidewalk. "It took him, like, five hours," Sekyiwa remembered. "He didn't get there until nighttime."

The Shakurs' life on Carrigan didn't last a year. The high rent ultimately denied them the stability they'd hoped for; Afeni had a difficult time covering her portion. "The three of us were in this plan together to get this house," said Jean. "We were moving on up and we had a plan to pay twelve hundred dollars a month, which was unheard-of because we were previously paying five hundred, six hundred a month. Afeni couldn't hold her end up, because at that time she became addicted to crack cocaine. It wasn't as if she had bad intentions. She did not smoke every day. But as she developed this addiction, when she got her check, instead of contributing to the rent, she took her check and went to smoke."

In the middle of one night, during what at the time seemed to be an irreparable family blowout about finances, Afeni packed up the kids and moved out of the house. She had no idea where she would go next.

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If there was a glimmer of hope for the future during the family's brief, tense time in White Plains, it was the birth of Tupac's acting career. Coming at the height of his family's troubles, the opportunity to perform onstage with seasoned actors in a classic theatrical production might not have happened if it weren't for his aunt Jean. The year before the move upstate, Jean was combing the *New York Amsterdam News* for ideas. She was searching for a solution, a hobby, or an activity that might keep her second-oldest son, Scott, out of trouble—something that was in no short supply on streets of the city. An advertisement jumped out at her from the page: A CASTING CALL! Actors were needed to audition for an upcoming production put on by the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble in Harlem.

Jean had heard of the theater group and knew of its rich history and powerful mission. Ernie McClintock, its founder and director, had been inspired by the Black Arts Movement of 1965–1975, an effort that was started by cultural nationalism advocates, those who dedicated their lives to integrating their own Black creative expressions, traditions, music, and art into the fabric of American society. The goal was to create Black art, in all mediums, for Black communities, in alignment with the pride and solidarity of the Black Power movement. McClintock envisioned a creative space where Black actors could tell stories of their own experiences. Jean thought it was a great outlet for a young man like Scott, raised in a household where cultural awareness and self-expression had always been foregrounded.

By the time the family relocated to White Plains, Scott was fully immersed in and committed to the program, riding the train in and out of the city for rehearsals and performances. Sometimes, Afeni asked Scott to take Tupac and Sekyiwa along with him. As Tupac sat in the theater's audience bay, he witnessed the magic of a stage production as the story came alive and the cast transported themselves to another time and place. It wasn't long before Tupac started to ask if he could tag along with Scott. As he sat and watched for hours, sometimes even for full days, he longed to be a part of the excellence unfolding in front of him.

In the early months of 1984, once the family had left White Plains and settled back into the city, the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble began preparing for an exciting new show. McClintock had been contacted by the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, which was fundraising for Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign that year. The coalition wanted to engage the theater group for a production of Lorraine Hansberry's classic play *A Raisin in the Sun,* to be staged at the landmark Apollo Theater in Harlem. The characters and story lines in Hansberry's play were all too familiar to the Shakur-Cox household: the play centers on the Youngers, a Black family who live on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s, dreaming of a better life while facing the obstacles of segregation and disenfranchisement.

As McClintock began pre-production, he mentioned the need for a child actor to play the part of Travis, the eleven-year-old son of the Younger family. Scott quickly suggested Tupac. Everyone was intrigued by the idea of the young man who had been watching intently from the audience for the last year as they rehearsed, and a time was quickly set up for him to audition.

Tupac was overwhelmed with excitement about this unexpected opportunity. He was already an enthusiastic, dedicated performer in the many family productions he had carefully orchestrated with his sister and cousins. But this was a chance to do it for real, in front of a huge audience. He dove into the role, rehearsing his audition lines with Scott night after night. When it was time to audition, Tupac stood center stage in front of McClintock, ready to deliver. He nailed it.

Years before, at the Little Red Preschool, Afeni had bristled at the idea of her son as an entertainer. But this time it was different. This was art, serious theater to be performed by an esteemed Black acting ensemble, led by a man who had dedicated his life to the advancement of Black arts. Tupac would be performing for the first major Black presidential candidate and some of the most important people in the Harlem community. “She was supportive,” remembered Scott. “She would make sure he got to rehearsal on time, and she was real happy about it all. She knew all about who Lorraine Hansberry was…and she was happy about him being in one of her plays.”

That June, Tupac’s thirteenth birthday was fast approaching, and McClintock and others in the ensemble planned a celebration to honor their youngest cast member. For Tupac, the day was a good one in a whirlwind of not-so-good ones, as family problems between Afeni and Jean continued, and the Shakurs bounced from one New York address to another. But it was also a day of renewal, not only celebrating his birth but marking his entry into the world of theater. Tupac received an ocean of love, a few sentimental gifts, and an outpouring of congratulations from his fellow cast members and from others in the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble. One of them, Hazel Smith, presented him with a box of thirteen crisp $1 bills, each one rolled up and tied with a yellow ribbon. And Minnie Gentry warmly read the poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes, which she felt was well suited for the young child she’d befriended:

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I’se been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Tupac's talent and resilient spirit had impressed Minnie and the rest of the cast. "The female actors actually loved him. They would baby him and kiss on him," Scott remembered. At the same time, they enveloped him in a more adult world. "He'd be walking around the dressing room and the women would undress because everyone's pretty much uninhibited." Scott remembered that Tupac was taken aback at first, wide-eyed and wondering whether he shouldn't see what he was seeing. Scott just laughed and told his cousin, "Welcome to theater."

As rehearsals began, Tupac approached every line on his script with precision and professionalism. "He definitely was a member of the company in short order," said McClintock. "His attitude toward the work was so positive and so committed for someone his age. He learned his lines in nothing flat, and he was able to respond to direction immediately and well."

It was his very first venture into theater, and already he was sharing the stage with veteran actors. Not only would he appear in the playbill with Minnie Gentry, who had acted in everything from major Broadway productions (including *Lysistrata* with Sidney Poitier) to movies and television, but they would enjoy a close and personal friendship during the course of the production. Many nights after rehearsal, Minnie walked with Tupac and Sekyiwa to the train, regaling them with stories from her past. Tupac was in awe, hanging on every word.

Finally, the big night arrived: August 10, 1984. Backstage, Tupac bristled with anticipation. In rehearsals, he'd worked hard to transport himself to 1950s Chicago in order to inhabit Travis Willard Younger. Now he thrilled to the idea of doing it in front of an audience, using every bit of what Ernie McClintock had been teaching him: To *become* the character. To *create* and *live* on the stage. He couldn't wait to introduce himself to the world, especially hearing that the audience would be filled with Black celebrities and that presidential candidate Jesse Jackson would be the guest of honor. As Tupac waited for the curtain to rise, Jackson took his seat in the renowned Apollo Theater amid the dapper Black audience, some of them adorned in tuxedos and designer dresses. Tupac was ready. When the curtain crept upward and the theater went black, a silence slipped over the audience, and he took a deep breath and waited for his cue.

For the next two hours, Tupac entered a new realm. He never hesitated or stumbled over a line; he came off just as seasoned as the veterans he shared the stage with. More important, the intense feeling of the performance would shape the rest of his life. He later told an interviewer, "I caught the bug…but really I just enjoyed expressing myself—and anytime I can express myself I can let some of the pain go from a childhood like mine."

In the audience Afeni and Sekyiwa sat next to Jean, T.C., Kenny, and Bill, all bursting with pride. It was an evening that eased the Shakur spirit. Cousin Bill remembered the feeling of sitting in the audience that night: "This was the biggest thing for our family since Afeni's trial. Pac was onstage and the boy aced it. And I'm sitting in the audience with my girlfriend and we were just amazed. He wasn't nervous. He wasn't making *any* mistakes. He didn't stutter. It was hard to believe, because he didn't have long to study for this play. And he had a large part in that play. He played the kid, and it was a major role. And he studied for that and went onstage in front of thousands of people and aced it. He was with all these professional actors. And all the political giants of New York were there. At that moment I knew he was a special kid. That was the first time I said to myself, 'We might have someone in the family that could actually do this.' "

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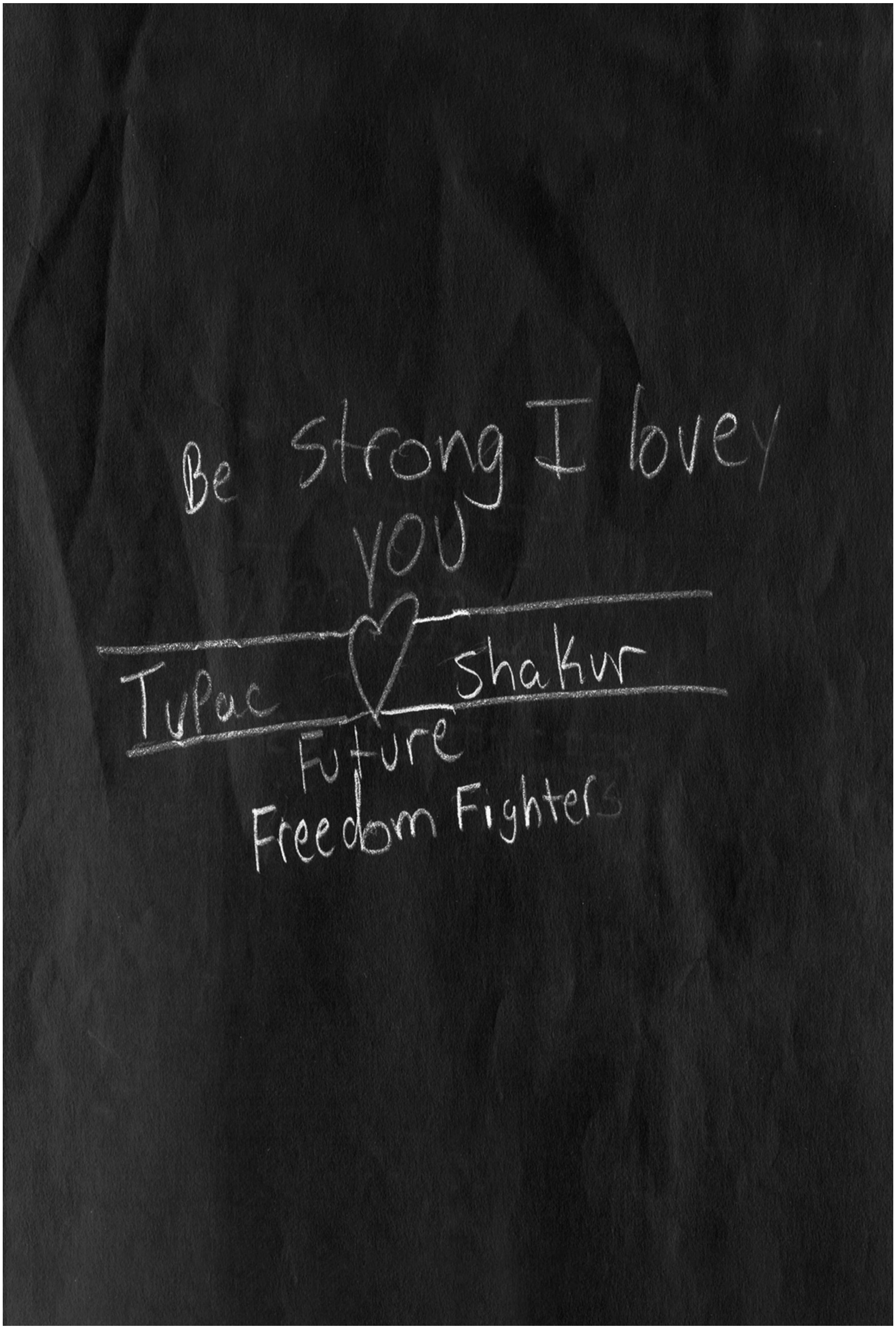
This monumental event in the life of the Shakurs wasn't enough to swing the pendulum back in the right direction. Afeni continued to struggle. Years of being a rock for everyone in her life—for her fellow Panthers, for all those she tried to help with her activism, for her children—with little support for herself had taken a hard toll. Even a superhero could only take so much. Her drug use had become more frequent. And her estrangement from her sister's family in White Plains had left her without the one place she had always been able to turn. With no permanent address in New York City, Afeni struggled to keep herself and the children above water. She was losing ground. Sekyiwa recalls, "We ran out of places to go."

But family is family. Even though Jean and Afeni had their differences, Jean knew she had to help find an anchor for her sister, Tupac, and Sekyiwa. They had family in Baltimore, an aunt named Sharon. Jean reached out and arranged for Afeni and the children to move in with Sharon and her daughter, Lisa. It would give Afeni a reset. It would get her away from things in the city that kept her spiraling. A new start, Jean hoped, could save them.

And so in the fall of 1984, Tupac, Afeni, and Sekyiwa boarded an Amtrak due south. They purchased one-way tickets with no plans beyond finding temporary refuge at their aunt's home in Baltimore. Jean accompanied them to Penn Station. "The clouds that day were unforgettably thick, almost ominous," she remembered, "causing a darkness to fall over New York earlier than usual." Jean boarded the train with them to squeeze in every last moment of shared time. This would be the first time in their lives they would live so far apart. Jean hugged and kissed them repeatedly as she reassured them that it was the best thing for them. Afeni nodded, knowing it was. Everyone cried, except for Tupac. He didn't want to leave, but he was trying to remain strong. The conductor's voice boomed over the PA system. *Last call, all aboard.*

As the train started to pull away slowly, Aunt Jean stood on the station landing searching the windows for her niece and nephew. She found them and quickly tried to offer them a smile, a sign that everything would be all right. But as the train passed before her, she locked eyes with Tupac, who held her gaze as the train pulled away.



Be strong I love you

Tupac ♥ Shakur

Future
Freedom Fighters

PART II

BALTIMORE

05

NOTHING TO LOSE

1984–1985

> I'm thirteen, can't feed myself. Can I blame daddy 'cause he left me? Wish he would've hugged me.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

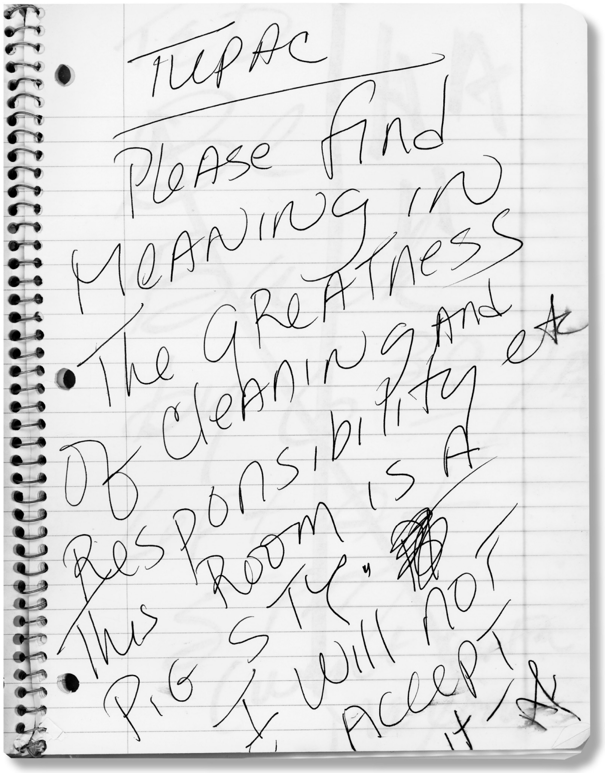
Tupac traveled one way on Amtrak from New York straight into the eye of a city in turmoil. Baltimore's inner city, like other urban centers across the country, had withered under the scorching effects of Reaganomics. President Ronald Reagan had promised Americans that he would make the country "Prouder, Stronger, Better," and vowed that the gains of the wealthiest would trickle down to the communities and the pocketbooks of the less fortunate. Instead, the gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen. Crime increased significantly as the sale of crack cocaine ravaged communities across the country.

Baltimore offered a striking example of the decay and neglect that plagued inner cities, a picture of the urban degradation and despair wrought by Reagan's tax increases on the poor. Moving there was hardly the answer Afeni was looking for, as Tupac was quick to note. "Baltimore has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy, the highest rate of AIDS within the Black community, the highest rate of teens killin' teens, and the highest rate of teenage suicide and the highest rate of Blacks killin' Blacks," he would later recall. "And this is where we chose to live."

Aunt Jean arranged through their aunt Sharon for Afeni to move in with their cousin Lisa and her son, Jamal. Lisa was already moving, so the plan was for Afeni and the kids to join them and then eventually take over the apartment. For a short time, while Lisa packed up her and Jamal's possessions for the move, the boys slept in Jamal's makeshift bedroom while Afeni and Sekyiwa shared the dining area, which they cordoned off by stringing a drape between it and the kitchen. Weeks later, Lisa and Jamal moved out, and Afeni took over the rent. The apartment at 3955 Greenmount Avenue was all theirs.

The one-bedroom, ground-level unit was located in the Pen Lucy neighborhood, in the center of one of Baltimore’s notorious drug zones. The front door was only steps from Greenmount Avenue, the busy boulevard that ran throughout Baltimore and separated their impoverished area, filled with dilapidated buildings, barred windows, and graffiti from a middle-class neighborhood filled with single-family homes and condominiums.

Though the location was far from ideal, Afeni kept the small apartment immaculate. The aroma of burning incense hung in the air while music played in the background no matter the time of day. Friends of Tupac during this time remember the calm environment that she created. “She was always nice and pleasant, always reading a book,” one of them would recall of Afeni.



TUPAC

Please find
Meaning in
The greatness
Of cleaning and
Responsibility etc
This Room is A
Pig STY."
I will not
Accept
it / A

At times, Afeni would write Tupac notes in his own notebooks and leave them for him to find.

Click here to view as text

Calm—unless, of course, you traveled to Tupac's domain in the back of the apartment. Tupac had created his own private world in the makeshift bedroom that his cousin Jamal had converted from an old patio. The floor was covered with a greenish-blue turf-like carpet, and the thin plywood walls were the only thing separating Tupac from the cold air of the back alley. Tupac hung posters of his idols, LL Cool J and Bruce Lee, adding smaller magazine cutouts of Sheila E. and New Edition. The boom box that Legs had bought for him was the command center of his bedroom, surrounded by piles of blank cassettes on which he recorded songs from the radio. In every corner were cups half-filled with sunflower-seed shells, a habit he had developed shortly before they left New York. There was no closet, and piles of clothes lay scattered across the floor. In the winter, the un-insulated, unheated room remained frigid, but no matter how messy or how cold the room got, it was a haven for Tupac.

Afeni often made her way back to Tupac’s room to take in the loud music and teenage mayhem. As if there were an invisible boundary preventing her from entering, she always stopped in the doorway to deliver her life lessons, often lectures about cleanliness. “You can’t have an organized mind if you’re living in this kind of disorder,” she insisted. It didn’t matter—any straightening up Tupac attempted was short-lived. Tidiness was not one of his burgeoning qualities.

But the apartment on Greenmount had a bigger problem than the state of Tupac’s bedroom: rats. Large holes dotted the kitchen’s floorboards, through which rats the size of possums squeezed into the house in the middle of the night. Efforts to stop them were futile. Tupac and Sekyiwa were responsible for sealing all the food and storing it in the cupboards each night before bed, but the rats were determined. They scurried along the kitchen countertops, devouring crumbs left behind. One night a rat got stuck in one of the traps that Afeni set and it started squealing and squawking, trying to get out. Tupac tried to throw his lamp at it. And then a hammer. But nothing could kill it. Sekyiwa recounts, “We’d hear ‘thump, thump, thump’ all night long. By day three, we had no food left. Every month this would happen. And we’d have to wait for a few weeks until we got food stamps again.”

Life on Greenmount Avenue presented greater hurdles than rats. In New York, the Shakurs had been poor, but they’d had no shortage of family and friends. In Baltimore, for the first time they were detached from the security and assurance of knowing they would find some sanctuary if Afeni could no longer pay rent. Now they only had one another.

Each day, Afeni did her best to move beyond the traumatic aftermath of her life as a Panther, which meant facing the fact that she was the survivor of a lost revolution. “It was a war and we lost. The people who lose really lose. Your side lost means that your point lost. That whatever you were trying to get on, that did not get over. That the point that won was that other point. And that’s what you see. That point just gets replayed all the time.” And now, in Baltimore, Afeni wrestled not only with losing “the war” but also with the emotional trauma. While confronting her lingering feelings of abandonment from her comrades, she tried to avoid seeking refuge in drugs all while feeling the urgency of putting food on the table for her children.

Moving forward with parenting as her priority, she enrolled in a computer-training program, and within months, she was hired as a full-time administrative employee at a distinguished investment bank in Baltimore. As a data processor working the night shift, she earned minimal wages and worked a grueling schedule, but with a steady paycheck she was finally able to relieve some of the family's financial burden. Tupac hated seeing his mother work the night shift, but through it, the three learned to rely on one another in a way they hadn't before. For years, Tupac had shared Afeni with her relentless activism, and her absences had not always sat well with him. "I rebelled against her because she was in the movement and we never spent time together because she was always speaking and going to colleges and everything," he would recall. "I always used to feel that she cared about 'the' people more than 'her' people." In their new lives in Baltimore, Afeni was able to spend more time with Sekyiwa and Tupac. Her focus was to strengthen their relationship and make up for lost time. "After that was over," Tupac said, referring to Afeni's period of intense activism, "it was more time spent with me and we were both just like, 'You're my mother?' And she's like, 'You're my son?' So then she was really close with me and really strict."

Each morning Afeni and Sekyiwa traveled together by city bus to Sekyiwa's school, where Sekyiwa was a third-grade student and Afeni volunteered as a classroom parent. On weekends, Afeni, Tupac, and Sekyiwa loved to explore the neighborhood. They would walk across Greenmount Avenue and make their way through the mostly white residential area to the community garden. Afeni remembers these walks as a time to reflect on where they'd been as a family and where they wanted to go. On very rare occasions, they had a few extra dollars for a nice meal, and the three would ride the bus to Baltimore Harbor, walk along the shops, and return home with a bushel of blue crabs. Tupac would spread out newspaper for a tablecloth while Sekyiwa poured the crabs out on the table for them to devour.

But crabs from the harbor were enjoyed only on special occasions, and the usual meal was Oodles of Noodles or Top Ramen. Tupac loved to fire up the Chinese wok and throw in a head of chopped cabbage and a swig of soy sauce with the noodles. Golden fried chicken wings and yellow rice was another of his specialty dishes. On the nights there was no food in the refrigerator, they relied on takeout and at times shared one order of chicken wings and fries between the three of them.

As Afeni spent more time with her kids, her educational lectures shifted. The constant drilling in the militaristic social mandates of the Panthers receded. Having been hunted by the government but then betrayed by her Panther comrades, Afeni had a general distrust of whites that was replaced by a more broad-based skepticism. With the children, she added to her lessons on self-defense and vigilance and started to preach intellectual and moral growth. She taught them that the search for knowledge was “an eternal journey.” Her lessons included: Don’t be quiet. Read. Be honest. As they rode the bus around Baltimore, she would drill moral codes into them. Not to pay a bus fare is stealing. “The best thing to do is not to steal and not lie. And you have to be the person who decides when it’s stealing.” She explained later in an interview, “I would always teach my children that the fact that they were able to get away with taking something that was not theirs, or not paying for something they were using, that is the worst thing that could happen. Then you have been changed, and you’re not going to stop the devastation until you get caught—and every time you are piling up burden and pressure on yourself.”

These moral standards of behavior reflected Afeni’s fear that even outside the movement her children would be targeted as Shakurs. She always told her kids that they were in danger and that if they got into trouble, they would find out who they were. These lessons rang loudly in Sekyiwa’s ears, and though they reflected Afeni’s long-standing paranoia, they remained grounded in truth. One afternoon Sekyiwa came home from school and told Afeni that her class was going on a field trip and that she didn’t want to go. “They had a field trip to visit the FBI building,” she explained later. “I didn’t go to school the day of the field trip, and sure enough when I went to school the next day, the kids were like—'Oh, we saw your dad! You look just like him.' " Apparently, Mutulu's photo still hung in the halls at the FBI. "That was when he was one of America's Most Wanted. They saw his picture on the poster."

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In the fall of 1984, Tupac started the eighth grade at Roland Park Junior High. He was used to starting new schools, but navigating the world of junior high peer groups proved challenging. He would have to edge his way into social circles that were well established. The fact that he didn't care about the latest clothing trends didn't help, especially when fashion in Black America was starting to take its cues from the impending wave of hip-hop. Soon to be a definitive strand of Black culture, the music had been gradually growing in influence over the past decade. From the Sugar Hill Gang's groundbreaking global hit, "Rapper's Delight," to Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks" to Run-D.M.C.'s "It's Like That" and Whodini's "Friends" and "The Freaks Come Out at Night," an exhilarating new sound was shaking up the country, and with it a pioneering and bold new fashion movement. Shell-toe adidas, Russell sweatsuits, Starter jackets, and gold chains were the new status accessories, and you'd better find a way to come to Roland Park Junior High dressed in style, whether you could afford it or not.

Tupac didn't have that luxury. Threats of social suicide or not, he knew there was no way for him to buy the latest shoes or jacket to keep up with his fellow classmates. Each morning he chose from the wrinkled heaps of secondhand clothing strewn across his bedroom floor. He had a pair of jeans and a pair of black suit pants, both too long. He didn't care. The solution was easy—he quickly hemmed them with staples before he left for school.

Tupac's classmate Dana "Mouse Man" Smith recalled the first day Tupac walked into the classroom. "He had this high-top that was in steps. One side was higher than the other. Real fuzzy, no shape-up. And he had braces, half braces, like metal plates are on the front but the rest wasn't on there, like he had square pegs on his teeth, but the rest of it wasn't on there yet."

According to Mouse, Tupac came into the classroom on his first day of school and searched for an empty desk. He slid into one toward the back of the classroom, unaware that the seat already belonged to a student named William, a kid twice his size. It wasn't long before William returned from the restroom, stood over Tupac, and demanded his seat back.

"You're in my seat."

"I don't see your name on this seat," Tupac replied, matching the tone of the angry kid staring down at him.

Unbeknownst to Tupac, William was known among the students as "the dude with no nail"—his fingernail had been torn off in a lawnmower accident, and the mangled finger became a symbol of his toughness.

"Get out my seat!" William ordered.

The teacher, Ms. Gee, tried to intervene, as her two students remained in a silent standoff until, finally, she said, "Tupac, I'm sorry, that's William's desk. He was there before you. Would you mind if you just took another empty seat?"

Begrudgingly, Tupac got up and found another empty desk. Mouse remembered this moment as requiring a tacit declaration of loyalty, as everyone in the class exchanged glances and ultimately chose William's side. So began a campaign to ostracize the new kid. He wasn't cool, and to attempt a friendship with him would be a social liability.

Even with Afeni's strength and lessons in self-pride as a foundation, the social challenges started to weigh heavily on Tupac as the school year wore on. Coming home to an empty house didn't help—often Afeni and Sekyiwa weren't yet back from work and school, and he missed the comfort of the extended family that he had grown up with. His cousins were now many miles away, and he missed the chaos and chatter of their company. And now he had the rejection from his classmates to contend with. One day he came home from school and asked Afeni if they could talk.

"What happened?"

"I miss New York," he said solemnly.

She promised Tupac that she would take him and Sekyiwa to visit. In the meantime, Afeni found that reminiscing helped ease Tupac's pain. Long discussions threaded with memories of the good times they shared in New York often turned into a night of singing. Afeni always knew the words to her favorite folk songs, but Tupac and Sekyiwa used a book of lyrics so they could sing along. Together they sang songs like Lloyd Price's "Stagger Lee" and Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons."

In his bedroom, however, Tupac studied lyrics of a different genre. He'd spend hours with his boom box, memorizing the words to the rap songs he heard on the radio. He started to write his own songs and even gave himself a rap name—Casanova Kid. When he realized that you couldn't be a rap star without an audience, he would walk around the apartment loudly reciting verses of different rap songs:

Casanova kid on the microphone
Place called New York was my home

Years later, Sekyiwa laughed at the memory of her brother repeating one specific rap song over and over again. "I really thought he was the dopest, smartest…but then I heard someone say Kurtis Blow wrote that."

It wasn't long, though, before Tupac gained his sister's approval with an original piece. She recalled the lyrics to the first rap he ever wrote about her:

Jet Set's my name
And I'm a pretty girl
And when I get on the mic, you know I rock the world
When I go to school I do my work
And when the school bell rings, I go berserk
I'm nine years old and I would like to say
That I'm nominated every year for MISS USA

One day at school he was given the opportunity to showcase his budding creative talent for his eighth-grade English class. The students had been assigned to write a poem about how they spent their summers. When it was Tupac's turn, the class sat in hushed silence, their expectations low. But when he started performing, it was a revelation. He wrote a piece about his love for summer. "It was like a rap, but it was a poem. The poem was nothing like anybody had heard before," Mouse recalled. "We looked at this guy, you know, with the flop-sided hairdo and half braces. And everybody just looked at him a little bit different after that."

On the bus home that day, Mouse and Tupac each expressed admiration for the other's poem. They discovered they lived just blocks apart, and when Mouse beatboxed for Tupac, the deal was sealed. From that point on, they rode the bus together daily and became an integral part of each other's quest to make music.

Mouse's endorsement marked a complete turnaround in Tupac's social status. His classmates' disdain vanished. Suddenly, they wanted to know everything about the cool new kid from New York. Their energetic questions about his life in the big city before coming to Baltimore gave Tupac the confidence to shed the name Casanova Kid and rename himself MC New York. He changed his wardrobe to match—he still wore the white T-shirt and stapled pair of pants, but now with MC NEW YORK emblazoned across them in black ink.

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Though still years away from the commercial juggernaut it would become, hip-hop continued to gain cultural momentum. The era of Black Power had ended, but its artistic tendrils, from the poetry of Amiri Baraka to the spoken-word soul raps of Gil Scott-Heron, had been transformed into something exciting and new. Black America felt great pride upon hearing this new sound infiltrating the radio's airwaves—they had a new genre of music all their own, a sibling to jazz and rhythm & blues. From its birthplace in the Bronx, hip-hop blazed a trail through inner cities across the country, offering a medium through which to excavate and reflect the Black experience. Tupac, now thirteen years old, sat in the crux of this shift from one era to the next, soaking in the aftershocks of Black Power while gravitating toward a new flavor. Hip-hop was a bolt of style and energy that would soon electrify Black America.

When pioneers like LL Cool J, Run-D.M.C., and Eric B. & Rakim released their debut albums, Tupac tuned in. He sat in his room each night listening and studying songs like "Eric B. Is President" and LL's classics "I Can't Live Without My Radio" and "Rock the Bells." He'd been writing poetry ever since Mutulu introduced him to haiku, and now he was witnessing men and women on the national stage, writing and performing rhymes set to a beat. To him, both forms of writing were related. And both called to him. He wanted to relay stories that needed to be told, the ones his mother had been telling him all his life. It was time to tell the truth about America's history, about its dark past, and especially about the oppression and disparities that were plaguing communities. Even at this young age, Tupac knew that the truth cleared paths for change.

Many years later, he spoke of poetry as rap, and rappers as poets. "Right now it's almost impossible for you not to see how strong rap has gotten," he would observe. "It's like our brothers and sisters, our youths and some of our adults, their ear is pinned to rap music. And if you really wanna get our message out and you really wanna start teaching, we need to start using our methods. The Last Poets did it with poetry. Even in our history from ancient African civilization, poets went from village to village, and that's how stories and messages and lessons were taught. History repeats itself….Being the strong race that we are, we picked up those positive vibes and started rapping."

Hip-hop cemented Tupac and Mouse's friendship. Before long, the two boys became inseparable. Mouse was well known around town for his beatboxing skills, but now he had an equally talented songwriting collaborator. They made a perfect pair: Tupac, the lyricist, and Mouse, the human beatbox. The two wrote songs on the city bus on the way to school, giving commuters an impromptu early morning performance. During school, Tupac and Mouse staged rap battles with their schoolmates; afterward, they'd spend hours at the local park in their homemade "studio," a giant structure originally constructed as a play space for children but that had at some point been adopted as a bathroom by the local homeless. Mouse explained, "There was this thing called the bubble. This big plastic thing. It smelled like piss. But the acoustics was crazy. You couldn't get acoustics like that nowhere."

Before long, word of Tupac's talent spread beyond school. In February of 1985, halfway through his eighth-grade year, he and Mouse were invited by a well-connected entertainment event planner named Roger to perform at the Cherry Hill Recreation Center with the popular rappers Mantronix, MC T, and Just Ice. The opportunity awakened the boys' dreams of stardom. Assuming the established rap artists on the bill would bring their managers and record label representatives to the show, they saw the gig as an audition for an even larger stage. Tupac and Mouse rehearsed incessantly every night leading up to the performance, hoping to make a lasting impression in front of industry executives. Seeking a name to perform under, they decided to call themselves the Eastside Crew, a nod to their East Baltimore pride.

When Tupac and Mouse took the stage that night, few would have guessed they had previously performed only for schoolmates, city bus patrons, and friends. They moved confidently through a five-song medley, starting with a song titled "Nigga Please!" about an overzealous ladies' man. Their set climaxed with Mouse's beatboxing solo, which drew applause and cheers, and ended with a song called "Rock On!" Though they weren't exceptionally savvy in their stage presence, the duo's performance was a relative success.

The boys' intuition that professionals would be there proved correct. In the crowd that night was Mantronix's manager and Jive Records A&R executive Virgil Simms. And their preparation paid off—Simms was impressed. Within days of the show, he reached out to Roger to discuss the possibility of offering the Eastside Crew a recording contract. Roger set up a meeting, and on the ride over the thirteen-year-olds could hardly contain their excitement. That day, Virgil made an official offer. He wanted the Eastside Crew to record their debut album on the Jive Records label.

Tupac couldn't wait to get home and share the news with his mom and sister, but he and Mouse needed just one thing to make it happen: their parents' signatures on the contract.

Afeni was repelled by the idea of her son signing a recording contract, top record label notwithstanding. Without hesitation, she demanded Tupac cut off all communication with the label and sat him down for a lecture on the importance of education. Afeni had noted rap music's influence on her son, and while she wasn't opposed to the messages and values of the hip-hop culture as a whole, she didn't want his interest in rapping to get in the way of his academic career. She took pride in raising well-rounded children and feared that the obligations of a recording contract might overshadow the curiosity he'd already developed for the arts of literature, poetry, and theater. There would be no signed contract, no record for Jive. Afeni told them, "You guys are too young." Mouse remembered: "Tupac cried about that."

For weeks, Tupac brooded. His mother had stalled the momentum of his dreams. But like most teenagers, he had no choice but to carry on, wait it out, and find a different path. Still, the contract offer boosted Tupac's confidence and focus. It drove him to further hone his craft. Despite his mother's emphasis on education before all else, he started to spend less time at home and more time making music with Mouse, determined to keep his skills razor sharp so that he'd be ready to go when the next offer came his way.

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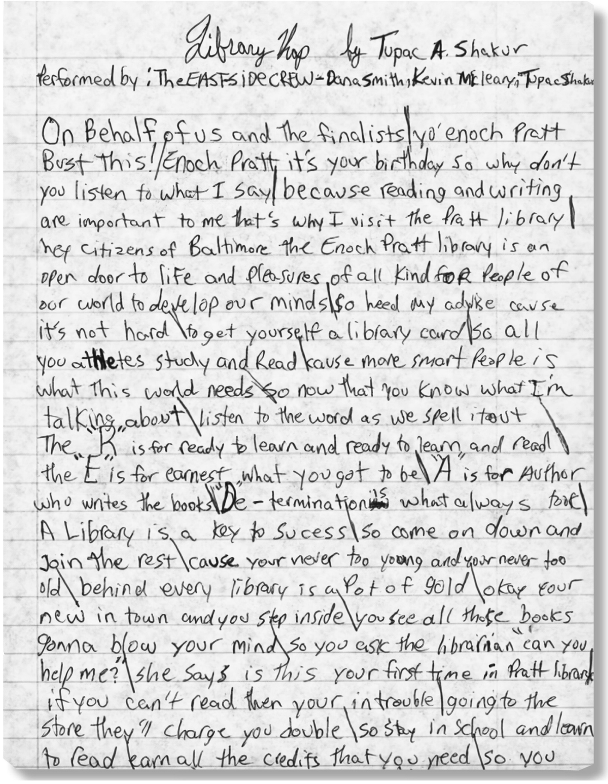
At fourteen, Tupac was an avid reader of the local daily newspapers. Crime statistics, political debates, Reaganomics, and global issues filled his young mind. For Tupac, reading the news was an *emotional* experience. Whereas most people might skim the paper and shake their heads at the sad news and tragic stories, Tupac was deeply affected. The words flew off the pages and hit him with full force. And when he set the paper down, he couldn’t just go about his day. He had to process everything he read and find a way to humanize these brutal realities. He had to highlight the less fortunate and thread them into his art.

The newspaper was also a way to search for opportunities to share his talent. Poetry contests, rap contests—he signed up for whatever he could find. And soon he was being recognized. The first prize he won was the Stop the Violence Award for a song he wrote entitled “Us Killing Us Equals Genocide.” The song, a cautionary tale about the effects of gun violence and crime on the dreams of young people in urban areas, reflected his growing concern about his own community:

Let me tell you about Roger
’Cause he was smart
He wanted to be a doctor, operate on hearts,
Got a scholarship to go to a real good college
Didn’t want to get high, he wanted to choose knowledge
Now, Roger was at home one fateful night
Right next door to Roger was a horrible fight
He knew the girl that lived there, so he was concerned
He stepped out to see what happened but never returned
Roger was shot six times would never be seen
Died a poor Black and so did his dreams



Library Rap by Tupac A. Shakur
Performed by ; The EASTSIDE CREW - Dana Smith, Kevin McLeary, Tupac Shakur

On Behalf of us and the finalists yo' enoch Pratt
Bust this! Enoch Pratt it's your birthday so why don't
you listen to what I say because reading and writing
are important to me that's why I visit the Pratt library
hey citizens of Baltimore the Enoch Pratt library is an
open door to life and pleasures of all kind for people of
our world to develop our minds so heed my advice cause
it's not hard to get yourself a library card so all
you athletes study and Read kause more smart people is
what this world needs so now that you know what I'm
talking about listen to the word as we spell it out
The "R" is for ready to learn and ready to learn and read
the "E" is for earnest what you got to be "A" is for Author
who writes the books "D" De-termination is what always fool
A Library is a key to Sucess so come on down and
Join the rest cause your never too young and your never too
old behind every library is a Pot of gold okay your
new in town and you step inside you see all those books
gonna blow your mind so you ask the librarian "can you
help me?" she says is this your first time in Pratt library
if you can't read then your in trouble going to the
store they'll charge you double so stay in School and learn
to read earn all the credits that you need so you

Tupac performed this rap with the Eastside Crew at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland State Library Resource Center in Baltimore. He wrote it for a library contest and placed second.

Click here to view as text

That same year, Tupac spotted a flyer: CALLING ALL RAPPERS! The Enoch Pratt Free Library planned to host a talent competition in which contestants were asked to write a library-themed rap to honor the institution's fiftieth birthday. Participants had to be under eighteen years of age, and no profanity was allowed. Rapping about the library came easily to Tupac, who loved reading and recognized the importance of self-education thanks to Afeni's influence. He'd already devoured books such as *Seize the Time* by Bobby Seale and *Blood in My Eye* by George Jackson. With his rap, he wanted to reach readers and nonreaders alike to urge them to understand that reading is the key to success. He wanted them to look at any library as a pot of gold.

His piece for the competition was called, simply, "Library Rap." On the day of the talent show, the Eastside Crew was ready to go. Mouse started to beatbox, and Tupac rhymed sharply into the microphone.

The rap was a hit. Mouse recalls, “We went through a semifinals. And then a finals. Two little girls won. We won second place.” Tupac was disappointed they didn’t walk away with the final prize. Mouse adds, “Tupac wanted to stop rapping forever.”

But perhaps more moving than the lyrics was the performance itself. Deborah Taylor, Enoch Pratt’s librarian and coordinator of school and student services, remembered the judges unanimously agreed on one thing that day—that Tupac lit up the room. She recalled, “When Tupac performed, you could not take your eyes off him.”

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When the Eastside Crew wasn’t entering and winning competitions, the boys often spent their time hanging out “up top,” on “the hill,” an area of East Baltimore that rose above Tupac’s Greenmount apartment and where men, young and old, clustered on a street corner selling drugs, watches, and whatever else you might need. In the middle of the street hustle, the sidewalk gambling, and the clouds of tobacco and marijuana smoke, Tupac and Mouse sat taking in the scene. Pot-filled cigars passed from hand to hand through bravado-filled conversations and occasionally stopped with Tupac. Guns were handled and admired. “Up top” was the local “cool school” for East Baltimore’s finest hustlers, and Tupac readily enrolled.

But instead of selling drugs, Tupac and Mouse trafficked their talent. They made money by freestyling for Mouse’s uncles and their associates—money that was much needed. The family was barely getting by. Baltimore may have been a fresh start, but making ends meet was still a struggle. Afeni once gave Tupac her gold earrings to take to the pawn shop, and with the money he got from them, he was able to buy a few bags of potatoes and some meat to hold them over for the month. Even though the money Tupac made rapping during that time was pocket change, every cent helped at home. He realized quickly that anything he earned freestyling should be saved to pitch in for groceries. It also meant less cash for Tupac’s bus fares and movies on the weekend, and during this time Afeni's admonition that Shakurs don't steal or lie competed constantly with the temptation to slide past a bus driver or sneak into a theater when he and Mouse trekked around Baltimore. Eventually, he realized he needed to find a job, something that helped bring in a regular income.

At the time, Mouse was working weeknights at a neighborhood daycare center, where he was responsible for cleaning and straightening up once everyone went home. Tupac already hung around every night waiting for Mouse to finish, so Mouse offered to split the pay fifty-fifty if Tupac took over half the tasks. Tupac also shoveled snow for neighbors, and at fourteen, he quickly learned that the more snow he shoveled, the more Oodles of Noodles and meat for homemade McRib sandwiches he could buy.

With two jobs and his side hustle rappin' for cash, Tupac, for the first time since moving to Baltimore, had enough extra money for a cheap bus ticket to New York. Mouse would come too. Tupac was eager to introduce his friend to Aunt Jean and the family and show them how he'd grown as a performer. Cousin Bill remembered the first time he heard Tupac freestyle in the middle of the living room. "He went around the entire room talking about everybody in the family in a rap. It was *dope*! It was dope because Pac was using words in ways I hadn't heard rappers use at that time. He was smart, and very articulate. It blew me back. I saw his brilliance right there at that point."

The trips to New York soon grew more frequent, and Tupac looked forward to weekends he was able to get back. The company of his cousins was more than worth the four-hour bus ride. But the money he made in Baltimore only took him so far. Once he arrived in New York, he realized that eating out, going to movies, and roaming around the city required even more money. He conjured up something he called the "dollar plan." Separately, he'd ask everybody in his family for a dollar. Then, he'd go hang outside where inevitably he'd meet several people he'd known from the years before. Many were glad to see Tupac. "Yo, man, let me get a dollar?" he would ask. Not until later would anyone put together that he'd hit up his whole family and several more acquaintances. Tupac would end up with more money in his pocket than anybody.

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In the fall of 1985, Afeni enrolled Tupac at Baltimore's Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Named after the acclaimed African American poet, Dunbar was a magnet school, offering additional programs in career instruction, such as EMT training and nursing. To Afeni, those were promising attributes of a high school education.

Tupac felt differently. Dunbar had a huge sports culture, especially basketball, from which he felt totally alienated. And he had few allies there—most others from Roland had enrolled at different high schools in the area, so once again Tupac had to start over at a school where he knew no one.

He missed his cousins in New York. He felt lonely at a school in which he could find not a single redeeming quality. And even though he continued his friendship with Mouse, his daily collaborations with Mouse at recess, and at lunchtime were a thing of the past. At home, the rats, the empty refrigerator, and the freezing cold bedroom remained blunt, bleak realities of his daily life. Tupac needed a shift, for things to turn around in the right direction. Or just a *better* direction.

But first came another blow: The only man he'd known as his dad, the only man who claimed him as his son, died suddenly. "Legs came out of jail. He was out for about two months," recalled Tupac's cousin Bill. "He started smoking crack again. He took a hit and caught a heart attack. The person that he was with at the time panicked and didn't know what to do."

Soon after Legs's death, Afeni discovered that he could not have been Tupac's biological father. She explains, "I found out that he always knew that he couldn't have children. He didn't ever think that Tupac was his child. He *chose* him as his child."

When she told Tupac the news of Legs's death, he grieved. Even throughout the times when Legs had unexpectedly disappeared from his life, Tupac's wish for him to be his father had been constant. Later, Tupac realized that these on-and-off visits did not meet the standard of fatherhood, but as a child, Tupac excused Legs's erratic presence. He had missed all the critical moments in Tupac's life. He hadn't been in the audience when Tupac was onstage in *A Raisin in the Sun.* When Tupac left New York for Baltimore, Legs was a no-show at Penn Station. He hadn't come to Baltimore to visit, or even called, and Tupac had not seen Legs once since he was sent to jail. Legs's absence angered Tupac, and now the fact that he was never coming back filled Tupac anew with the pain of abandonment. "Tupac suffered from a deep sadness when Legs died," Afeni recalled. "As Tupac grew older, he missed the fact that he didn't get more from Legs. But he never wanted to sever his connection from the streets. Legs was his definition of being down." This sadness was always infused with the anger, regret, and bitterness that he later poured into his lyrics. In one of his most poignant, moving songs, "Dear Mama," he lashed out:

They say I'm wrong and I'm heartless, but all along
I was looking for a father, he was gone

Tupac's days were often brightened by the discovery of new art or music, and one of those moments struck mercifully around this time during a shopping trip to Goodwill. Afeni often took Tupac and Sekyiwa to the secondhand store to buy school clothes and other necessities, and on one of their trips, Afeni had just enough money left over to splurge on a new record for her collection: Don McLean's classic *American Pie*. When they got home, Tupac plugged in the record player, dropped the needle onto the vinyl, and turned up the volume.

It was the song "Vincent" that would capture his attention. He listened closely, absorbing McLean's sad, haunting elegy of the doomed artist Vincent van Gogh:

They would not listen
They did not know how

Perhaps they'll listen now

McLean's lyrics captured Tupac's imagination. At heart, the song embodied van Gogh's pain and anguish as an artist who never felt acceptance and recognition. Tupac appreciated McLean's ability to convey humanity and raw emotion through music. The song, and the lessons it offered, would stay with him for the rest of his life. "My inspiration for writing music is like Don McLean when he did 'Vincent,'" Tupac explained later in an interview about his process. "Deep stories, like raw, human-need stories. I want to do that with my music." Van Gogh would come to be a touchstone for Tupac.

One afternoon while Afeni was sitting on their front walk, a loud screech and a thump interrupted her afternoon calm. Tupac and Sekyiwa barreled out of the house to see what had happened. A car had struck a dog and fled. The three of them hurried to see if they could help. At the scene, they met two women, neighbors who lived across the street on Greenmount, who quickly scooped up the wounded dog and ran to their car, hoping to reach a vet in time. Tupac asked if he could go along with them. They said yes, and with Afeni's approval, he jumped in.

The next evening Tupac and Afeni walked across the street to thank the ladies and soon found themselves invited in. As Tupac sat on the couch and took in the well-appointed middle-class home, his curious eyes landed on a bright, colorful coffee-table book: a volume on the life and work of Vincent van Gogh. He picked it up to browse, but soon grew so absorbed in its pages that the ladies took special notice. Days later they walked across the street to Tupac's house to bring him his own copy of the book, a gift for helping care for the wounded dog.

Afeni learned that one of the women was a retired teacher from the Baltimore School for the Arts, a high school across town. The school was considered the crown jewel of the Baltimore public school system, sending many students on to successful careers in creative fields. The arts school piqued Afeni's curiosity, bringing her back to her childhood days at the High School of Performing Arts in New York. Even though her own time in an arts school with a predominantly upper-class student body had not felt right, she was open to the possibility that this school could be a good fit for Tupac. It seemed like an easy decision, especially since he wasn’t happy at Dunbar. She asked him if he wanted to apply. With the lack of theater opportunities at Roland, Tupac’s passion for acting had taken a back seat to his writing and music, but he liked the idea of restarting his onstage journey. Within days Afeni reached out to the school.

In the spring of 1986, Tupac submitted his application to the Baltimore School for the Arts, and soon he received a call inviting him for an audition. The day Tupac received the news he’d be auditioning, he already considered himself in. It did not faze him that only 18 theater students were admitted each year out of roughly 250 applicants. He was confident that he would be able to convince the admissions board that he would be an asset to the student body. Getting accepted would mean no more Dunbar. No more detour. He would be back on the path to one day becoming an accomplished, famous actor. He started rehearsing his monologue and waited for audition day to arrive.

06

IN THE DEPTHS OF SOLITUDE

1986

I exist within the depths of solitude
Pondering my true goal
Trying 2 find peace of mind
and still preserve my soul

—TUPAC SHAKUR

"Nigger!"

The word ricocheted off the glass entrance doors of the Baltimore School for the Arts into Tupac's ears. He swung around to see a car full of white kids staring at him. One of them spat out the window. Tupac froze.

Afeni had been expecting this moment. She had, in her way, been preparing her son for it. "For every young Black male child who is seven years old," she later explained in an interview, "there comes a time at eleven—or some point in his life—there is ninety percent possibility that some person is going to look at him and call him a name. It doesn't matter what the name is….They may not say the N-word…but they're going to look at that child and they're going to denote to that child what his station in life will be in this country. When they did that, I wanted him to have a place to go in here"—she touched her heart—"and find beauty, and where he found integrity, and strength within himself, he could fight back from that."

Tupac did just that. He took a deep breath. He was determined not to let the kids' ignorance and vitriol rile him. He didn't have time for that type of nonsense. It was the day of his audition, and nothing was going to stop him from nailing it. Quickly regaining his composure, he turned and headed into the building. Once inside, he walked up the school's winding marble staircase and gathered himself for his audition.

Tupac entered the school's theater and sat down until his name was called. When it was his turn to audition, he drew from his experience under Ernie McClintock's direction and delivered a monologue from *A Raisin in the Sun*. Perhaps as a reflection of his growing maturity, he chose not to reprise the lines he had performed as Travis, but instead gave a speech written for Travis's father, Walter Lee. Unfazed by the panel of four teachers in front of him, he performed with ease and determination. When he finished, he was sure of his performance. In an interview years later, he explained that his audition and time at Baltimore School for the Arts was "one of my good-luck times."

The teachers took immediate notice. Richard Pilcher said of Tupac's audition, "He was a natural. He was damn good for a kid that age." Another teacher, Donald Hicken, noted, "I think the panel could see right away that he really belonged there."

That fall, Tupac started BSA as a sophomore. Right away, he learned that this school experience would be different from all that came before. In the hallways of BSA, he found, everyone walked on equal ground. Finally, he was in a place where personal misfortunes were not a target for judgment. The secondhand, staple-hemmed pants and uneven haircut that had once drawn stares now marked his individuality. At BSA, one's personal style was treasured, not shunned. He was finally able to travel freely among his peers, with nothing but the passport of his creative genius.

Although he was accepted into the theater department, his reputation as one of the more skilled rappers in town preceded him. Just weeks into the school year, he was already navigating the school's hallways and making new friends with ease. Tupac even built friendships with juniors and seniors—a quick path to the top of the social ladder. And the fact that he was born and raised in New York, a city in which his classmates uniformly aspired to shine, contributed to his ability to move seamlessly between different cliques: Black, white; rich, poor; dancers, visual artists, and performance artists. Tupac became a bona fide chameleon.

As successful as Tupac was with the transition to his new school, there was one group who did not accept him into their circle: a crew of Black students from the visual arts department. They decided that Tupac's appearance was just too "bummy" to merit a friendship, or even a formal acknowledgment. The security of new friends and the mostly welcoming environment gave Tupac the confidence to challenge the reigning rap talent at the school, who happened to be in this group. Before long, word spread among the students about a possible rap rivalry, and the air of BSA's hallways grew thick with a pressing question: Did the new kid actually have the skills to win?

On the night of the battle, at the Beaux-Arts Ball, Tupac made sure that Mouse was by his side. Dressed in his black suit pants, a black button-down oxford, and a cardigan sweater, Tupac led a crowd of students down the stairs into the basement hallway near the cafeteria. With a quick introduction of Mouse to the crowd, the battle commenced. Tupac took his shots, while Mouse beatboxed, both hyping up the crowd with their delivery. The battle raged back and forth, each side trying to shut the other down. The students grew excited to watch the contest as Tupac and Mouse's performance began to draw bigger and bigger cheers. Their opponents knew they were losing ground. Finally, they acquiesced and bowed out. Darrin Bastfield, one of the rap artists who went against Tupac, remembers, "It was very clear, very evident that they rehearsed, because I never seen anything like it….They beat us!"

After the victory, having earned school-wide respect, Tupac leaned into the life of a popular performing arts student. His confidence, once shaken by rocky transitions at Roland Park and Dunbar High, now grew as he became more comfortable at BSA. In a place where the eclectic was fashionable and shell toes and Starter jackets scarce on the ground, his MC NEW YORK jeans had become his signature. He even started to paint his fingernails black.

"What's with the black nail polish?" Afeni asked one afternoon when Tupac came home from school.

"Oh, yeah, this," he responded, staring at his fingers as he held them out in front of himself. "That's just so I can stay in touch with my feminine side."

“What do you know about a feminine side?”

“Everything you taught me. And I don’t wanna forget it. So this is a constant reminder.”

Afeni smiled proudly as she witnessed her son’s emotional intelligence blossom. She knew she had laid a firm foundation for the man he was becoming and was happy to see that his new life at the performing arts school was adding more layers to his burgeoning consciousness.

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Once Tupac had settled in at BSA, he began directing his energy to acting classes. Movement Studio, Scenic Arts, Vocal Studio, and Learning Technique accounted for half of the school day. These classes were taught in an informal studio setting with no desks or podiums, only an open floor with a few scattered chairs and a barre attached to one mirrored wall for dance. During instruction, students sat in semicircles to observe the work of their classmates.

One of the classes on Tupac’s fall schedule was Introduction to Acting with Donald Hicken, the director of the theater program. Hicken remembers calling roll the first time that year: “One of my earliest memories of Tupac was the name, because it was such an unusual name. When I said his name during roll call, somebody laughed. And he fastened a look on that person that sent a message, ‘You laugh at my name again, you’re in trouble.’ And he was serious. And after that his name was never an issue again. That was the first time I realized that we were dealing with a very powerful soul. You can call it charisma or talent or whatever. It’s a mixture of that, but there’s that extra ingredient, and that’s that power to influence, power to control [the] behavior of others.”

Introduction to Acting had a two-part curriculum: a studio component and an academic survey of the history of acting. One of the first studio assignments was to choose a song and write a solo performance piece that included music and movement. Each student was expected to showcase the piece in front of the class and would be graded on their performance. With his reputation as a skilled rap artist growing steadily around the school, especially after his victorious battle at the Beaux-Arts Ball, Tupac had set expectations. Hicken admitted that he and the rest of the class expected that Tupac would incorporate a rap song into his performance.

But once again, Tupac surprised them, showing a different side of himself. Tupac sat on the floor of the classroom studio with the cohort of twelve students he'd been assigned to through graduation. When his turn came, he walked to the center of the classroom and stood quietly, waiting for the music to begin. Soon, the class heard the opening strains of Don McLean's "Vincent" flowing from the speakers. As the song unfolded, Tupac sauntered around the room, his movements dramatic, slow, and controlled. He looked through the window longingly, as though searching for something or someone. His one-man performance was quiet and calm, hinting of melancholy and mystery.

"Tupac did a beautiful piece, a story told in movement," Hicken recalled. "He wrote about his affection for van Gogh. He related to van Gogh because he loved his work and because he also was misunderstood. But strange as it was, Tupac wasn't misunderstood yet. It was a premonition."

Tupac's years at BSA and his exposure to classmates from starkly different backgrounds provoked a much different response within him than it had for Afeni. He saw the same discrepancies between the haves and the have-nots, but he also had his mind opened about race. "That was the first time I saw there was white people who you could get along with," he said. "Before that, I just believed what everybody else said—'They was devils.' But I loved it." Ultimately, once Tupac settled into BSA, he approached differences between kids at his high school with a different lens. He welcomed those who had more than he did by cultivating friendships based on reciprocity. And if someone made a genuine effort to get to know him, no matter where they lived or how much money they had, he would show them equal respect. It was simple: If they were kind, he would welcome the opportunity for friendship.

One friendship he welcomed was with a petite caramel beauty who had a confident smile and a feisty attitude, a classmate named Jada Pinkett. They first met at a school assembly for students in the theater department. Though he wasn't her type at first glance, Jada recalled in an interview, "as soon as he approached me, he had this magnificent smile and always had this great laughter. He was like a magnet. Once you paid attention to him, he kind of sucked you in. We hit it off from that moment on. It was like a connection that we had and then the more we got to know each other of course, we realized what the connection was all about. We were lifelong friends."

Jada asked Tupac for a favor. She had been wanting to get to know one of the seniors at the school, a talented visual artist named John Cole. She asked Tupac to befriend John so he could introduce him to her. Obliging, Tupac staged a seemingly casual introduction one day in the "smoking room" at the school. Within days, the three became close friends, forging bonds that would span a lifetime.

As the trio's friendship strengthened, so did Tupac and John's bond. John remembered his first impressions of Tupac: "Tupac was definitely into getting attention. He was always on a stage, always hammin' it up. So we'd go to parties and he'd be doing stand-up, having ten or fifteen people crackin' up and I would be like, Yeah this is my good friend."

They were a study in opposites. John was reserved and humble, Tupac boisterous and proud. John brought to the friendship a new perspective for Tupac, one that was middle-class and white. He lived comfortably in a nice home with an endless food supply, money in his pocket, and access to a family member's vehicle. And he had sweaters. Afeni recalled, "John had some wonderful sweaters, the warmest sweaters I'd ever seen. And Tupac would wear John's sweaters. I think that John's friendship was important in Tupac's life in Baltimore. More important than probably anything. John is just a really good human being."

Even though John was white, and lived in Guilford, one of the more established, well-manicured, crime-free sections of Baltimore, he and Tupac shared the experience of growing up fatherless and relying on their mothers as models. John would later speak to his belief that being raised by their mothers permitted an uncommon depth and sensitivity in their friendship. To be raised without a father, he admitted, “brings a certain lack of understanding of the male world, but a desire to integrate and match up with peers around you. You don’t really get how it’s supposed to be. You’re not raised to be the jock. We were raised different. It was a common bond threaded with emotion, not male bravado and competition.”

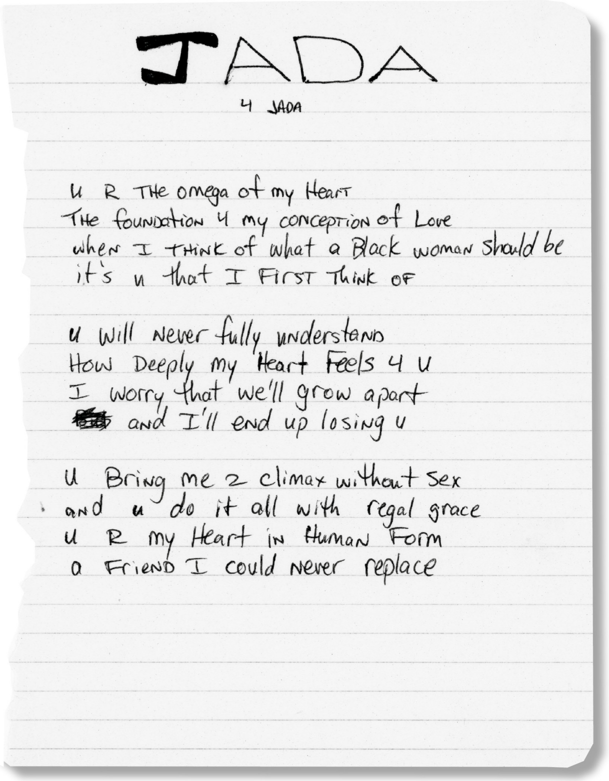
Tupac, Jada, and John talked about their passions and dreams, but also opened up about their families. Jada later explained that she and Tupac connected because they both “had mothers who were addicts.” “That was one of the things when we were younger that we really connected to and related to with one another ’cause we were struggling,” she recalled. “We were really just struggling for basic survival. Where you gonna get your food? How you gonna get your clothes? What shoes are you gonna put on your feet? How are you gonna keep your lights on in the house?”

With survival as the common bond in their relationship, Tupac felt as though he’d finally met someone he could trust. Jada explains, “When you have somebody that has your back when you feel like you’re nothing, that’s everything.” And with that she quickly became Tupac’s loyal friend and strong female perspective on all subjects. Her fire and confidence were attractive and became the glue that held the friendship together. With Tupac and John, she shared her open, emotional mind and the spiritual teachings of her aunt, from which Tupac developed a new interest in the afterlife and the metaphysical.

Tupac taught Jada and John about the history of his family, and his mother’s involvement with the Panther movement. “In my family I was taught about the movement of Martin Luther King. The civil rights movement,” Jada recalled. “When Pac came in the picture, he schooled me about Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party….It was something that he lived.” He also exposed them to the harsh realities of poverty. Jada explained, “Pac was poor. I mean in the true sense of the word. He owned two pair of pants and a sweater. In his house he had a mattress on the floor with no sheets. When I say poor, I mean poor. He had *nothing.*”

Close friends and family knew that Tupac, from the moment they met, had a special connection to Jada. “All I remember is John coming over to the house all the time. And nothing else could be talked about but Jada,” Sekyiwa remembered of Tupac’s life at that time. “His music changed. His people changed. And Jada came—the entity! The magazine posters had come off his wall and John’s art went up on his wall. And pictures of Jada.”

Tupac wrote several poems about his love for Jada. One of these poems, “Jada,” showed the depth of his lifelong love for her:



JADA

4 JADA

u R THE omega of my Heart
THE foundation 4 my conception of Love
when I THINK of what a Black woman should be
it's u that I FIRST Think OF

u will Never fully understand
How Deeply my Heart Feels 4 u
I worry that we'll grow apart
and I'll end up losing u

u Bring me 2 climax without Sex
and u do it all with regal grace
u R my Heart in Human Form
a Friend I could never replace

After he moved from Baltimore to Marin City, Tupac wrote this poem about his lifelong friend Jada Pinkett.

Click here to view as text

Many nights, Jada, John, and Tupac stayed up all night debating and discussing subjects from Shakespeare to Reaganomics to Christianity. These late-night conversations unfolded as Tupac began spending more time at John’s family home. The Cole home offered Tupac comforts he had never experienced—modern appliances, a spacious living room with multiple large couches, cable television. But the luxury that Tupac enjoyed most was the well-stocked refrigerator. He filled up on every visit, whether it was a quick sandwich for lunch or a Steak-umm for breakfast. “I wouldn’t eat at my own house because Tupac ate so much,” John recalled. “If I ate also, it would take a lot of the food, so I would eat out…. So I was like eat everything you want while we’re here and we’ll get Steak-umms.”

Another luxury was the endless supply of marijuana. John and Tupac often rolled through the streets of Baltimore in John’s brother’s baby-blue Volkswagen Beetle. On most nights and weekends they drove aimlessly around the city looking for something to do, ultimately ending up back at John’s house, smoking weed in his bedroom. They listened to music for hours, artists ranging from Metallica and the Cocteau Twins to Tracy Chapman and Sinéad O’Connor. They dissected the lyrics and careers of Peter Gabriel, New Order, and Sting. Tupac loved the ’80s groups Yaz and the Family, especially the latter’s song “Nothing Compares 2 U.”

One of Tupac’s anthems that year was Peter Gabriel’s “Don’t Give Up.” “ ‘Don’t Give Up’ was the song that seemed to be one that all of us were listening to,” John recalled. “And it was kind of like the song expressed the dreams that we were headed towards.”

I’ve changed my face, I’ve changed my name
but no one wants you when you lose
Don’t give up

Tupac wanted to embrace every new opportunity BSA provided, even those he’d never considered before. Besides participating in a number of small school theater productions during his junior year, he accepted an invitation to perform as the Wizard in the dance department’s production of Igor Stravinsky’s ballet *The Firebird*. The director of the dance department asked Donald Hicken for recommendations, and Hicken, perhaps recalling the beauty and poise of Tupac’s first movement assignment, suggested him. Within weeks, Tupac was rehearsing onstage with students from the dance department.

The performance was to take place at the home of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Meyerhoff Hall, a classically designed concert hall with seating for over two thousand. Although untrained in ballet, Tupac committed himself fully, donning a black cloak and a pair of tights and dancing across a stage full of flitting fireflies. Ultimately, he found the fireflies much more appealing than the dancing. As Hicken recalled of Tupac's brief stint in the ballet, "*Firebird* was his only experience in the dance department other than the girls."

Indeed, Tupac would forge one of his most significant BSA relationships with a sophomore in the dance department named Mary Baldridge. The two grew close during daily *Firebird* rehearsals that often lasted well into the evening. Thus far, Tupac's social circle had consisted of equal numbers of Black and white students, so he didn't think anything of the fact that Mary was white. She had reddish hair and a fit dancer's body, and she was as smart in the classroom as she was fluid onstage.

Mary's family background held the key to the deeper, lasting connection she would share with Tupac. Just like him, Mary came from a family of activists who believed change could happen through drastic social reform and radical politics. Her father was the director of the Communist Party of Maryland, and Mary herself had founded the Baltimore branch of the Young Communist League after taking a trip to Cuba. The YCL's mission addressed working-class rights, equality, peace, democracy, environmentalism, and socialism—all fundamental pillars of Afeni's lessons during Tupac's childhood. Mary's branch was small, fewer than ten members, but all were seeking to change the economic and political climate in the United States. "A lot of people thought it was this whole idea of moving communism in and trying to take over the world," recalled BSA classmate and YCL member Randy Dixon. "But it was honestly a bunch of kids who were looking for some kind of positive outlet for our frustrations, who were disillusioned with how things were going in America."

As Mary and Tupac grew closer, she invited him to join the branch, and soon the pair was spending their free time together soliciting school friends to attend YCL meetings. They also directed their energy toward local politics. During the 1987 Baltimore city mayoral race, they campaigned for Kurt Schmoke, father of their friend and fellow BSA student Gregory Schmoke. Much of Schmoke's campaign agenda appealed to a younger demographic: He promised to improve Baltimore's public education, address the growing issue of teenage pregnancy, mitigate illiteracy rates, and find ways to prepare Baltimore's children for careers in growing industries. Mary and Tupac went door-to-door to talk to Baltimore residents about Schmoke's political agenda, and Tupac called on Mouse to help set up a rally in their neighborhood to bring awareness to the campaign and increase voter turnout. On a nearby playground, before a small gathered crowd, they performed an original rap to support Schmoke and his proposed policies. On Election Day, the Harvard-educated lawyer would become the first elected Black mayor of Baltimore.

As Tupac's political mind continued to expand, he began to critically analyze more of Afeni's lessons. One day he came home from school and asked Afeni why she believed that Malcolm X was a stronger leader than Martin Luther King, Jr. She reasoned that Malcolm was greater because he stood ready to fight in defense of the people, while Martin Luther King, Jr., preached that turning the other cheek in nonviolent resistance was the answer. Tupac rebutted, "But I think it would just be better to say that they are both different leaders with different philosophies, not to say that one is *better* than the other." Afeni appreciated her son's ability to critically analyze any topic, but also the newfound confidence he had to challenge her.

At age sixteen, Tupac's social vision was coming into clear focus, and he stepped into the role of a full-fledged activist. He pushed for urgent change in neglected neighborhoods like his own and, based on his expanding liberal views, called for a society that acknowledged the systemic discrimination that stunted people's lives, that left them voiceless and disenfranchised and slowly sapped their hope. Tupac knew that lost hope led to gun violence, teen pregnancy, and rampant crime. He felt called to press for change. "As soon as I got [to Baltimore], being the person that I am, I said, no, I'm changing this," he later recalled, addressing his teenage efforts. “I started a stop-the-killing campaign and a safe-sex campaign and an AIDS-prevention campaign.”

Mary’s ethical and moral ideals fit with Tupac’s pleas for change. She joined him in the Yo-No anti-gun violence campaign of the Northeast Community Organization (NECO), which had attracted Tupac around the time he heard the terrible news about the fatal shooting of a local boy. Although he and the victim, Darren Barret, had never been close, Tupac knew him as one of the older kids from around the neighborhood. Deeply saddened by Darren’s death, Tupac organized a vigil and memorial, passing out flyers that read, “In Candlelight Memory of Darren Barret.” BSA schoolmate and friend Randy Dixon remembers, “That was when we all tried to really start working together on the issue of handgun violence. Because it wasn’t just an isolated thing. We were all very concerned about what was going on.”

The day of the memorial, Barret lay in a casket in the center of the church. The event brought an unexpectedly large turnout. Tupac even urged the family of the boy who shot the gun to attend, believing that their presence would symbolize unity in the wake of such a tragic, life-shattering event. He had written a rap song with anti-violence and gun-control themes and he performed it for the assembled mourners, pacing the floor between the casket and the audience. His lyrics comprised a plea for everyone to join his crusade against unnecessary violence. It was a testament to how, even here, among a despondent crowd struggling with tragic circumstances, Tupac found a glimpse of hope.

“I’ll never forget those young kids singing ‘Black Butterfly,’ ” Afeni recalled. The evening of the memorial would long remain powerful in her memory, especially because she couldn’t believe Tupac and his friends had organized such an effort. “He was basically just a kid,” she remembers.

But of course he’d had a brilliant teacher. For sixteen years, Tupac had watched and listened as Afeni set up various community organizations, such as one of the first legal services unions, the National Organization of Legal Services Workers (NOLSW), and Blacks Against Abusive Drugs (BAAD). He attended union meetings with her and watched her organize a mission to protect the rights of women in prison. He watched her plan a candlelight vigil for the mothers of the victims in the 1979 Atlanta child murders, in which over the course of two years, approximately twenty-nine Black children, teens, and young adults were killed. None of Afeni's actions was ever lost on her son. And now Tupac took the torch from her, setting his own agenda for change.

Tupac's lyrics became the fuel for his efforts, as he began to write songs for a number of different local school and community events. He, Mary, and a handful of friends from BSA booked themselves at various schools and churches around the city and held assemblies, once even performing for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. Through these productions, they educated kids on issues like gun control, AIDS, and teen pregnancy. Tupac rapped and Mary danced, and when they were able to urge more of their friends to join in, they even acted out skits to drive home the social aspects of their messages. "We worked on skits dealing with kids being faced with the issue of how to solve a problem, for kids picking on you, should you go get your gat, or how should you handle that? We would go around to different schools," recalled BSA schoolmate Randy Dixon. "We were trying to provide some alternatives."

As they broadened their activism, Tupac and Mary continued to date. "When he was focused on Mary, there wasn't anyone else," recalled John Cole. "He wasn't looking for anyone else. He was a romantic. He wrote letters and did nice things for her." But despite their common interests, in the way of most high school relationships, Mary and Tupac's romance was short-lived, lasting only six months. Soon after the breakup, the two drifted apart, and Tupac began to relish the attention he received from other girls at school. He discovered that the promise of a commitment held less interest for him than exploring each proposition that came his way. The attention became too hard to resist—and apparently so was he. "Girls all went nuts for him," his teacher Donald Hicken recalled. "By the time he left here, he was regularly dating the most beautiful women in the school."

Tupac soon became quite the romantic strategist, often juggling several relationships at once. Fellow student Darrin Bastfield recalled seeing Tupac walk into the cafeteria one afternoon during the holiday season with more Christmas presents than he could handle, gifts, mostly clothing, falling out of the opened boxes.

From the sidelines, Jada watched the flirting and the dalliances, and she wasn't shy about letting Afeni know of her son's growing reputation. One night, Jada had choreographed a school performance of *The Nutcracker,* and Tupac brought Afeni along to enjoy the show and also to support Jada's efforts. Afterward, as the crowd gathered in the post-performance glow, Afeni, with Tupac next to her, congratulated Jada.

As the three of them walked toward the exit, Jada whispered something to Afeni. The two shared a hearty laugh, and a friendship between Afeni and Jada was born.

Tupac must have beamed at the sight of his mother and new best friend together that evening. Later in life, he gushed about the enduring love and respect he had for each of them. The night of the performance was a happy moment, perhaps the feeling of finally being settled. Even though things may not have always been great for Tupac at home, at school all was solid. But the ground beneath his feet was about to shift again.

07

KEEP YA HEAD UP

1987–1988

> I remember Marvin Gaye used to sing to me.
> He had me feelin' like Black was the thing to be.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

Baltimore School for the Arts' college prep curriculum paired with its demanding creative arts training proved to be rigorous for Tupac. With rehearsals extending well into the evening, it wasn't unusual for a student to spend twelve or more hours a day at the school. During his junior year, as he sat in math and biology classes, Tupac started to feel as though he was wasting his time learning about the Pythagorean theorem and quadratic equations. He knew that he was not on the path to becoming an engineer, a doctor, or a mathematician, and he began to shift his focus to classes that offered artistic training in the disciplines he thought would help shape his career. Eventually, Tupac brushed off his core academic classes entirely.

Tupac's immaturity mixed with his sharp wit and extroverted personality were a recipe for disastrous classroom behavior. His goofing off and comedic attempts to entertain his classmates, along with his failing grades, soon landed him on probation. On one academic status report, a teacher wrote, "Tupac has very good potential. His energy and enthusiasm is very strong and can be an asset to the class, but he needs to control his energy and not be disruptive to the work process of others." Another teacher wrote, "Tupac's behavior is extremely disruptive in class. He hasn't done any homework assignments. He's also been absent a lot. I've talked to him once, with little result. He has good potential, but isn't realizing it."

English teacher Richard Pilcher had faith in Tupac's artistic ability as well as his intellect. "Tupac was a damn good actor. He was intelligent. He had a great emotional instrument. He had a great heart. I think his future was really as an actor…who I think would’ve been right up there with the Larry Fishburnes and the Samuel Jacksons and the other fine Black actors that we have. He would have been in that company.” His academic report conveyed the confidence he had in Tupac’s ability: “Imagination and exploration good. Need to see greater discipline and more exploration in your work. Ask harder questions of yourself. And for crying out loud get your academic grades up. You should go to college. Learn some things in school. You could do it if you want to. READ!”

Read, he did. Tupac had been a voracious reader ever since the days he was forced to read *The New York Times* for punishment, but it was during his years at BSA that he began to boundlessly consume literature. He would get lost inside the stories of fictional characters or the subjects of biographies. His hunger for knowledge became insatiable. Donald Hicken remembers that Tupac often requested permission to do a Shakespearean monologue: “He had a great facility to understand Shakespeare because he loved words. He was good at it.” He read Plato and Socrates and devoured the novels *Catcher in the Rye, Moby-Dick,* and *Roots.* He spent hours in the library, sometimes during his lunch breaks. Mrs. Rogers, the school librarian, said of Tupac: “He was funny and had a twinkle in his eye and a great smile. He had problems, and [the library] was a good place for him. He read a lot of plays, poetry, and checked a lot of books out on art. He was interested in a wide variety of books even at his young age.” Tupac’s inquisitive mind ran to places most teenagers never ventured, but he still read only what he wanted to, not what teachers assigned.

The exceptions were assignments given in world history. Tupac found the lessons engaging, and he was particularly intrigued when his teacher introduced the controversial Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. Tupac was captivated by Machiavelli’s signature literary masterpiece, *The Prince,* which outlines the author’s hard-nosed theories of surviving by any means necessary as a king in a turbulent world of small, belligerent states. Machiavelli believed it was essential for a ruler to be feared, not loved. After class that semester, Machiavelli joined Vincent van Gogh in Tupac’s pantheon of historical heroes.

Outside school, when he wasn't rehearsing for a performance or hanging out with Jada and John, Tupac and Mouse continued their creative path in music, expanding their duo to four. They dropped the name Eastside Crew, and with two students from BSA, Darrin Bastfield and their DJ, Gerard Young, they formed a new group called Born Busy. They started to write and record songs together, some with socially conscious themes, including "Babies Havin' Babies," a plea for young girls to wait before they rushed into having children.

The group searched high and low for any opportunity to be discovered. One night after attending a concert by Salt-N-Pepa on the group's *Hot, Cool & Vicious* tour, they talked their way into the hotel where the rap duo was staying. Salt-N-Pepa, as they were known onstage, were pioneering female artists and the first in the history of hip-hop to achieve platinum status. Tupac told the security guard that he and his friends were part of their entourage, and they even put on a mini show to prove they were entertainers. The security guard believed them and ushered the boys to the elevator.

When they arrived at Salt-N-Pepa's hotel room door, they knocked in anticipation of a golden opportunity to showcase their talent. But as soon as Salt answered the door, the security guard they'd bamboozled just minutes before appeared. Just as Salt agreed to listen to them, they were pushed away. The security guard rode the elevator back down to the lobby with them to make sure they exited the building. As they rode down, Tupac chastised the security guard. "You ever had a dream?" he asked. The guard simply stood silent, refusing to engage in any conversation with these boys who had just lied to him. Tupac grew angry. "That's why your ass is still a security guard!" he yelled as he led his friends from the elevator and out into the lobby.

Tupac rarely hesitated to speak out and speak loudly against those he felt had wronged him. He couldn't help himself. This bold conviction, paired with sixteen years of absorbing an absolute distrust in authority from Afeni, sometimes led him into trouble. And as a young Black male, that trouble could sometimes have terrible consequences. Tupac admitted years later, “I got a big mouth. Can’t help it. I talk from my heart. I’m real.”

One evening, while at home with Tupac and her nephew Scott, who had come from New York to live with them for the summer months, Afeni realized her weed supply was completely depleted. She asked Scott to venture out to find some. When Scott arrived at the spot where he was informed that the dealers would return in a few minutes, he opened a can of beer to kill the time. He had been in Baltimore for just weeks and was unaware of the city’s strict public drinking laws. The police swooped in immediately.

“Excuse me, what are you drinking?” one of the officers asked.

“I’m drinking beer.”

“Well, is it good?” the cop asked with biting sarcasm.

“Actually, yes, it is. It’s nice and cold.” Scott wondered why he was being questioned.

“Do you mind pouring that out?” the policeman asked. His demeanor was still calm. “Can I see your ID?” Seconds later, the police handcuffed Scott. He was still confused about exactly what he was being arrested for.

Then, out of nowhere, Tupac appeared in the distance. Scott saw him approaching in a cocky, George Jefferson–esque strut.

“Why are you cuffing him?” Tupac yelled, his voice reaching the officers long before he did.

The police glanced at the approaching agitated teen. “Beat it, kid!”

“Tell me why he’s being arrested,” Tupac demanded.

“You better go, or we’re gonna lock you up too.”

“Lock me up? For what?!”

“What school do you go to?” the officer asked.

“Baltimore School for the Arts.”

“What are you, a dancer?”

“No, I’m an ac-TOR!”

Before long, the police had clamped cuffs on Tupac’s wrists as well and threw him in the back of the police car next to his cousin. In the holding cell at the police station, Tupac continued to voice his frustration through the bars. “You can’t lock me up for doing nothing!” They let Tupac go, but Scott was held overnight on a charge of drinking beer in public.

Tupac’s first run-in with the police offered a sharp lesson: If you mouth off to the police, no matter if you think you’re right or not, you’re going to face the consequences, especially as a Black man. Some might have internalized this lesson. Not Tupac. Instead, his conviction in demanding fairness and resisting injustice deepened. He would not stand down. He would not bend the knee. He would only stand up for what he believed was right in the struggle to be free from all police harassment or systemic oppression.

Increasingly, Tupac confronted another reality—the reality of the family’s poverty. Afeni’s bimonthly paycheck from her night shift at the investment bank was not much more than the $375 monthly welfare check she’d received their first year in Baltimore. It barely covered the rent. They didn’t have enough money for phone service or a television, and even basic utilities became luxuries. Some evenings when Tupac came home from school he was met with darkness when he flicked on the light switch. The familiar, oppressive weight of responsibility bore down on him as he peered into the unlit living room. But as a teenager caught in the throes of feeling much different from his peers, Tupac still found ways to thrive. Although he spent long days at school with his well-off schoolmates, those who didn’t have to stand up to police in their neighborhoods, who had heat in their bedrooms, who had more wardrobe choices than just a pair of pants, who had lunch money every day and who never had the lights in their home cut off, he found the space to grow despite these realities that may have very well limited his potential. He later recalled in an interview the bracing feeling of those moments when the electricity would be shut off: “I used to sit outside by the streetlights and read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* And it made it so real to me that I didn’t have any lights at home and I was sitting outside on the benches reading this book.”

He found comfort with John, who had graduated from BSA and moved into his brother’s apartment in the Reservoir Hill section of Baltimore. Living conditions were cramped, with John, his brother, and their roommate, Richard, sharing a small living space. But John still found a way to make room for his friend, and Tupac came over often, confiding in John about the latest challenges at home. He told John that the family's electricity had been turned off because Afeni didn't have enough money to pay the bill. John responded without hesitation and told Tupac not to worry, that he could help. The next day, John's father wrote a check to the electric company for the unpaid balance of $90.

But Tupac had another reason he didn't want to live at home. Afeni had fallen into a new relationship with a man she met earlier that year. At first he seemed to be an upstanding citizen. She trusted him and let him into her home. But not long after they met, time revealed him to be a liar, a thief, and an abuser. First, she caught him snorting heroin in her house. Then she discovered he had stolen money from her, emptying what little she had from her savings account. She demanded he leave and called 911. But before she could connect, he slapped the phone out of her hand and punched her in the face five times, resulting in two black eyes.

If crack cocaine had broken Afeni's momentum in New York, this relationship set her back in Baltimore in the same way. Tupac seethed with anger. He and Scott told Afeni that they were making a plan to find the man and beat him down, but she reassured the boys that she'd take care of it. She didn't want her son to get hurt or get mixed up in anything that she thought she could handle herself. Afeni remembered, "Tupac was sixteen at the time and never forgave me for not letting him protect me."

Gradually Tupac began to spend more time with John, who assured him that he had a place to stay for as long as he needed. After that, Tupac returned home only periodically to grab clothes. The distance put further strain on his relationship with Afeni. One time, in the middle of the night, when Tupac returned home to pick up a change of clothes before heading back to John's, Afeni woke up to confront him.

"What do you think you're doing coming in the house this late?" she asked.

Tupac was aggravated by Afeni's reprimand. "I stay at John's all the time anyway, so why does it matter?"

“It matters because you are disrespecting me by coming in at any hour you please.”

For the past year Tupac had felt that he was “driving the car with Afeni in the back seat,” as he’d told his aunt Jean over the phone. He felt that since he’d been helping with the household chores, giving Afeni money for groceries and cleaning the house, he should have some say in what happened at home.

Afeni didn’t agree. “If you’re livin’ under *my* roof, then you—”

“Well, as long as *he* is here, I’m not gonna live under your roof!” Tupac yelled. He felt so many emotions. He was tired of living by Afeni’s rules, especially when his mother had taken in a man who Tupac knew was mistreating her. And at sixteen, he felt that he was prepared to live on his own. “You need to just let me be the man that you raised!”

Afeni raised her hand.

“I’m not gonna let you hurt me.” Tupac backed away. “I’m not gonna let *anybody* hurt me or hold me down!” He stormed out.

Afeni realized he was right. He was no longer the four-year-old at daycare in need of a reprimand for doing James Brown splits on the table. No longer the third-grader in need of a spanking for crafting a clay penis in his art class. No longer the boy on the stoop in need of a lecture for failing to watch out for FBI agents who threatened her freedom. Afeni had made it clear before Tupac could even talk that he would become a strong, proud, independent Black man. And that’s who he had become.

But she was angry. Angry that he resisted her parental control. And especially angry that he no longer wanted to be at home. She ran after him, picked up a metal patio chair from the porch, and threw it down the stairs at him.

Tupac glared back at her. As Afeni ranted about how he needed to learn to respect her and her home, searching their porch for something else to throw, Tupac stood at the bus stop hoping a bus would appear. A moment later, Afeni found a rolled piece of carpet and hurled it down the stairs, but she missed again. Finally, the bus appeared, and Tupac got on and rode off.

—

Not long after the incident, Afeni cleaned house. “She put that man out right away,” Jean recounted. She and Tupac gradually allowed their anger to fall away. As they worked at mending their relationship, Tupac continued to help his mother make ends meet by dropping off money from his new job as a busboy. John had found him work at a local seafood restaurant, and as the restaurant expanded Tupac brought in Mouse, Darrin, and his cousin Scott as well.

To strip the monotony from the chore of bussing tables, Tupac entertained the crew by working on his “method acting” skills. He would slip in and out of several different characters. Some nights he transformed into Tony Montana from the movie *Scarface.* Other nights he became a character he created, an old drunk named Redbone who staggered with a limp. “He would stay in it for two, three days at a time,” John remembered. “We’d be like, ‘Look, you gotta do something else. I’m really getting sick of the Redbone.’ He would be staggering around, runnin’ into you and everything.”

Some nights Tupac ate at the restaurant, and other nights Afeni cooked and sent food back with him to John’s apartment. Their relationship evolved from one marked by dependence and maternal nurturing into a mother-son friendship suffused with love and respect. Over the years, Afeni had reached hero status for Tupac, and it was during this time that he began to think of her as the strongest woman alive. He admired her ability to overcome the dissolution of the Black Panthers and to stand on her own, but mostly he appreciated the continuous love she gave to him and his sister. “My moms is my homie,” Tupac would say. “We went through our little… our stages, you know, where first we was mother and son then it was like drill sergeant and cadet. Then it was like dictator and little country.”

By this point, Tupac was living nearly full-time with John, but he never stayed away from home for long. On his regular visits, he and Afeni would have long, wide-ranging talks. Tupac confided in Afeni about his girlfriends and listened patiently as she repeatedly reminded him to “use condoms” and “be careful.” Occasionally Tupac would touch on school matters, but he mainly discussed his experiences outside the classroom, filling their conversations with news about theatrical productions he had seen or participated in. With wide eyes, he spoke excitedly of *Les Misérables,* the Broadway musical he’d seen on a field trip with his theater class. He declared it a masterpiece and told Afeni that one day he wanted to star in such a grand theatrical production. Afeni admired his desire to reach beyond their world, his relentless curiosity, his fearless dreams that defied the limitations imposed by their lack of financial stability. She was proud of the portfolio he was starting to build—the theater department had recently produced a version of *A Raisin in the Sun,* and this time, Tupac played the lead.

Tupac and Afeni would watch movies together and discuss the story lines in depth. *Cornbread, Earl and Me,* a story about a promising high school athlete mistaken for a burglary suspect and gunned down by police, was the movie Tupac connected with most during that time. “That movie probably had more effect on him than anything,” Afeni remembered. “Laurence Fishburne’s [character in] *Cornbread* was probably the defining moment for him as an individual.” Tupac cherished his multi-tape VHS collection of Alex Haley’s epic drama, *Roots*. And he particularly liked *Sparkle, Cooley High,* and *Claudine,* all films with story lines he was able to internalize: single-mother themes, dreams of stardom, and police shootings. Tupac also enjoyed the movie *The Outsiders.* He identified so much with the characters in the film that he bought the S. E. Hinton book it was based on and read it multiple times. He memorized the Robert Frost poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” which the character Ponyboy recites to his friend Johnny, warning him that all good things come to an end.

Their discussions also included how much they missed Sekyiwa, who was spending the summer with Geronimo Pratt’s family in Marin City, California. Since they’d moved to Baltimore, Afeni had kept her eye on the possibility of moving out west to be closer to the Pratt family to help continue the push for Geronimo’s freedom. She had always known Baltimore would be a temporary home for them. Even though she’d shed her Black Panther responsibilities years before, she couldn't leave behind the many who were living in the aftermath of COINTELPRO's sting tactics, Geronimo among them. She thought the time to move might come once Tupac graduated from BSA.

And as Afeni started to plan their move from Baltimore, Tupac's close friendship with John and Jada remained strong—until one single incident shattered his trust in John and ripped the two apart. One night when Tupac returned home from his shift at the restaurant, he was surprised to hear that John and his brother were planning to move out and leave the apartment to their third roommate, Richard.

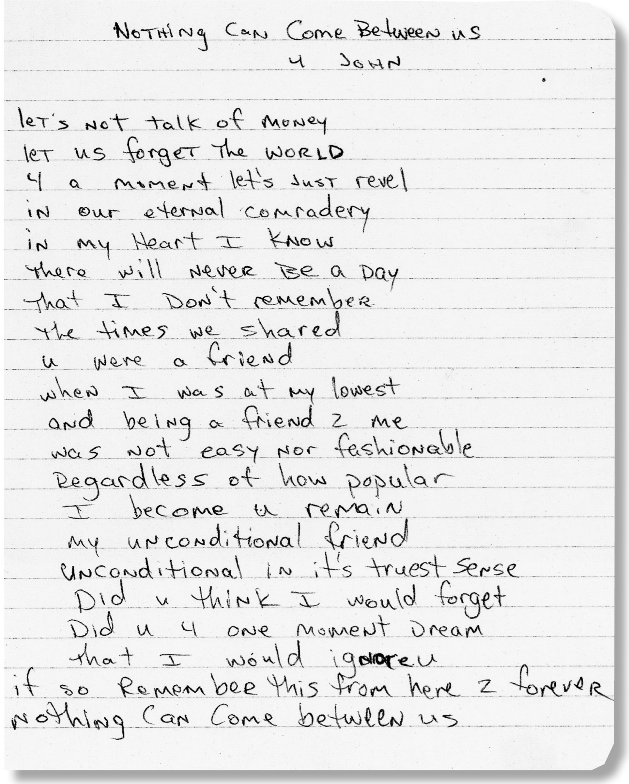
Another friend of John's was over that evening and laughed when Tupac walked through the door. He knew that John was about to hand Tupac the bad news. "Tell him, John," he said.

Tupac was curious. "Tell me what?"

"Tell him how you're moving out and that he's gonna have to stay here with Richard."

John noticed right away that Tupac was upset. He tried to interject and mend things before it got worse, but it was too late. Tupac felt betrayed by the laughter, and what stung even worse was that John had made plans behind his back. He didn't know Richard, who seemed to him just a random roommate. But at that moment he felt hemmed in, with little choice other than to stay. Going with John apparently wasn't an option, but after being out on his own, going home wouldn't work either. So in a pool of sadness and anger, he begrudgingly agreed to stay with Richard and pay a portion of the rent.

Tupac was crushed. He had trusted John more than anyone outside his family. John remembered, "It was a bad mix of scenes. A large misunderstanding. At the time I didn't know how to remedy it. He felt I let him down and whatever friend he saw in me that he felt to be an endless friend was letting him down. He closed up and iced over."



Nothing Can Come Between us
4 John

let's not talk of money
let us forget The world
4 a moment let's just revel
in our eternal comradery
in my Heart I know
there will never Be a Day
That I Don't remember
the times we shared
u were a friend
when I was at my lowest
and being a friend 2 me
was not easy nor fashionable
Regardless of how popular
I become u remain
my unconditional friend
unconditional in it's truest sense
Did u think I would forget
Did u 4 one moment Dream
that I would ignore u
if so Remembee this from here 2 forever
nothing Can Come betwien us

Poem by Tupac written about his close friend John Cole.

Click here to view as text

The two didn't speak until years later, though John remained in Tupac's memory as the years passed on, those memories eventually finding permanence in one of Tupac's notebooks:

…in my Heart I know
there will never be a day
that I don't remember
the times we shared
u were a friend
when I was at my lowest
and being a friend 2 me
was not easy nor fashionable

Tupac felt like the life he had built for himself was coming apart. He had lost his best friend, and soon after he lost something just as precious—any hope for a future at BSA. In June of 1988, at the end of his junior year, a letter from the school arrived at his home. “The committee has reviewed your son’s record…and decided to place him on probation for the first semester of next year…. Unless there is major improvement in the quality of his work, Tupac may be dismissed from the school at the end of the first semester. Tupac has not earned enough required credits to be in the twelfth grade next year and therefore will be retained in grade.”

As he approached senior year, his classmates began to talk about where they wanted to go to college or which theater programs or dance companies they wanted to apply to. With a cloud of academic pressure looming, Tupac felt defeated. Even if he could get his grades up, he didn’t see college as an option because of his financial status—if his mother had a difficult time keeping the lights on in their apartment, how would she help with tuition? Now even a high school diploma seemed to be slipping from his grasp. More immediately concerning was the possibility of suddenly having to pay rent, a responsibility he’d not had before. He needed $300 every month to match Richard’s portion, and although he was still earning tips at the restaurant, it wouldn’t be enough. Ever enterprising, he found work as an extra in a local radio commercial, a gig that paid exactly enough to make the month’s rent.

Through all of this, he held fiercely to his dreams of becoming an artist. His talents and creativity stirred within him, and even with life’s difficulties bearing down, Tupac still found sustenance in his acting classes, performing in school plays, and writing rhymes with Mouse and the others after hours. Only later in Afeni’s life would she realize the magnitude of this time for Tupac. Even as she watched him and his friends practice for hours, trying out their lyrics on her while they sat on the living-room couch, she didn’t realize how closely the arts were intertwined with Tupac’s vision for his future. “I thought acting was a passing thing,” she later admitted. They rarely discussed his classroom experiences at BSA or his dreams to go to college. When the school informed her that Tupac's graduation status was in jeopardy, she didn't hold back.

"If you don't get your diploma, you aren't going to amount to anything!"

"But all I want to be is an actor," Tupac responded.

"You're going to need to get your diploma before you start thinking about acting. So maybe you should try to go to a regular academic school."

"But I don't want to."

"What is the School of Arts gonna do for you but flunk you?"

Before Tupac could respond, Afeni dropped a loaded suggestion: He should leave Baltimore and join his sister in California; Sekyiwa had since decided to remain there and enroll in school. Baltimore had presented nothing but dead ends for Afeni. She had been saving money to make the move to California, with the intention of waiting for Tupac to graduate, but with his academic status now in question, it was time to send him out west. She would pack up the apartment and plan to move weeks later.

Move to California? Tupac had no idea how to respond to such a ludicrous idea. He'd spent the last few years aiming for the milestone moment in BSA's program—the senior performance project. Known by the students as "The Project," it was a culmination of three years of preparation, and only students with top-tier talent were invited to perform. Mr. Hicken had big plans for Tupac to play the lead in a version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* saying Tupac "was one of the strongest members of the ensemble." And even facing academic probation, he had still kept The Project in mind as a goal.

Tupac did not want to leave. Sitting in Donald Hicken's office, saying goodbye, he couldn't hold back the tears. "He was very, very sad," Hicken recalled. "He was leaving a family. He found an identity and a support that kids there get that they don't get at other schools. It's a school of oddballs where you can explore yourself until you find who you are. Tupac left only halfway discovering who he was and what he loved to do." Hicken told Tupac he didn't have to leave—he knew he could find a host family to take

Tupac in for his senior year. But Tupac knew he had to go, if for no other reason than to watch out for his sister.

Tupac left Baltimore without saying goodbye to any of his friends and classmates. There were no going-away parties and no farewell conversations. He didn't tell anyone in person that he was leaving. Jada remembered, "He literally got up in the middle of the night and bounced. He never said goodbye, and that was devastating. Getting that letter though…I think somebody gave it to an English teacher. I can't remember who he gave it to but some kind of way he gave it to an English teacher… and I got the letter. He apologized and once he got settled he called and wrote."

Dressed in a leather jacket with zippers across the front and a pair of ripped jeans, he waited at the bus stop in front of his apartment for the last time. A large suitcase sat beside him, and his backpack was stuffed with half-filled spiral notebooks, a couple of books, an album of Malcolm X's speeches, and a large stash of sunflower seeds for the cross-country journey. He had a handful of cash in his pocket for the bus ticket. As the bus pulled to the curb, he faced yet another goodbye to a city he called home. He said goodbye to Scott, who stood at the front door. Then he stepped onto the city bus that would take him to the Greyhound station. As the bus pulled away, Tupac waved a final goodbye, staring out the window until his Greenmount apartment was out of sight.

PART III

THE BAY

08

THUG STYLE

1988

> Had to move to the west to regain my style.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

When Tupac landed in Marin County, California, it ranked as one of the wealthiest counties in the nation. Just north of the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, the county boasts everything from breathtaking views to hiking trails on top of Mount Tamalpais, a top-tier public school district, and idyllic, safe neighborhoods. Filled mostly with suburbs, the county increasingly became home to San Franciscans fleeing the city for a safer community to raise their children in, eventually becoming a haven for tech and real estate CEOs, venture capitalists, and celebrities. Its quaint towns, including Mill Valley, Tiburon, and Ross, have been home to stars like Robin Williams, Tom Cruise, Sean Penn, and Andre Agassi.

Marin *City* was another story. Dubbed “The Jungle” by its own residents, Marin City, sandwiched between these well-to-do towns, was home to the county’s Black population. The “city” itself was small, an enclave community comprising one square mile, built largely along a looping street with one way in and one way out. Unlike its neighboring communities, which were saturated with wealth and affluence in the ’80s when Tupac arrived, many of Marin City’s residents struggled to make ends meet.

Founded in 1942, Marin City came into being as an “instant city,” rural land quickly developed to house the massive influx of workers to the county’s busy shipyards during World War II. Blacks from Southern states migrated to places like Richmond, Hunters Point, Mare Island, and Marin City to become welders, ship painters, skilled laborers, and boilermakers. In less than three years, workers from Marin City built and launched ninety-three Liberty ships and tankers from the Marin shipyards, an effort that became known locally as a “crucial” part of “winning the war.”

At the close of the war, white residents relocated to surrounding towns while Black residents were left without options due to racist redlining practices that kept them from getting mortgages or renting elsewhere. “Black people were not welcome anywhere in the county at that time,” noted the Reverend Fred Small, former senior pastor of Marin City’s Inter-Cities Fellowship. By the 1970s, Marin City was a predominantly Black community filled with residents who took pride in their local landmark flea market, their four cornerstone churches, a modest recreation center, and a super-sized liquor store named Hayden’s Market that was nicknamed “The Store.” Though Marin City’s segregated status would become emblematic of the county’s stark and disproportionate wealth gap, the community has maintained a strong sense of neighborhood solidarity, making it one of Marin’s most tight-knit communities.

The summer of 1988, Tupac stepped off the Greyhound bus in Marin City with just his suitcase, his backpack, and the sense of identity he’d cultivated in Baltimore. The only bright light for him at that time was seeing Sekyiwa. Apart for months, they now grew closer, knowing that with Afeni yet to arrive they had only each other to depend on. Tupac was seventeen, Sekyiwa just twelve. Together they would face a new chapter in a new city, on a new coast, during the critical years when they would come of age.

Marin City was just eight miles from San Quentin State Prison, where Geronimo Pratt was held. Tupac would join Sekyiwa at the Pratts’ apartment. As soon as he settled in, Geronimo’s wife, Ashaki, laid down the law. Tupac would have to follow the same rules she set for Sekyiwa and her own two children, Hirogi and Shona. Everyone was to be in the house by eight o’clock every night. But Tupac, by then nearly a legal adult, had grown independent during his time living with John in Baltimore and felt he was being treated like a child. He ignored the curfew and ventured out to see what his new community had to offer.

Just steps away from the Pratts' front door was Drake Avenue, a short stretch of a two-lane road that was the hub of local activity. Residents referred to this strip as "the Front." Government-assisted housing lined one side of the street. Men, young and old, hung around, leaning up against older-model and abandoned cars parked along the road. They rolled dice, talked shit, and slung dope.

For Tupac the poverty of Marin City outpaced even what he'd seen in Baltimore's Greenmount neighborhood. "Come to Marin City, and there's even more poverty," he later recalled. But it also prompted the realization that what he knew of the East Coast was not an isolated experience, and that the humiliations and hardships of the family's life were not their burden alone to bear. "I was finally starting to see it. The one thing we do have in common, as Black people is, we share that poverty. I made it to where I had knowledge that this wasn't just me. It was a bigger picture. It was my people that's really just getting dogged out. It wasn't just my family. It was all of us."

Seeking a new community, Tupac knew that the best way to meet people was to introduce himself through his art. Out on the Front in Marin City, Tupac showcased his rap talents to anyone who would listen, hoping to find not just friends but maybe even some connections who could offer the prize that still eluded him—a recording contract. In Marin City, where there were few if any theatrical productions, Tupac again saw rapping as the best way forward. He knew if he could gain a quick entry into the music business, the doors would open and create a pathway for him to garner the support he needed to start voicing his concerns.

That summer, hip-hop was approaching its golden age. Pioneering and influential artists hammered their way into the scene with hard-hitting themes and lyrics. Early '80s beats from artists like Kurtis Blow, LL Cool J, and Rakim paved the way for an evocative new subgenre of rap music, in which songs offered powerful social commentaries on the landscape of Black America and added new dimensions to the national conversation about race.

Tupac was listening closely. The moment he heard Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise" and "Rebel Without a Pause," he was sold. The lyrics wove a clear social message. Chuck D and Flavor Flav spoke of resistance in their songs, letting listeners know that it would take a nation to hold "us" back. For Tupac, the echoes of Afeni's lessons were impossible to ignore.

Just weeks after he arrived in Marin City, Tupac ended up at a house party not far from Ashaki's apartment, at the home of a local house DJ named Demetrius Striplin. As local rapper Anthony "Ant Dog" Marshall entertained the crowd to a beat, Tupac eagerly called for the mic. Who is this kid? people asked. Demetrius recalled seeing him around town days before and wondering who he was; in Marin City, a tiny, tight community, new faces tended to stick out. Now that same kid—sporting a worn white tank top, tattered jeans with MC NEW YORK painted down the pant legs, and a high-top wave—was in his house, standing right in front of him, holding the mic. As Tupac confidently busted an original song called "Girls Be Tryin' to Work a Nigga" over Mixmaster Spade's "Genius Is Back," the packed crowd took notice right away, and Ant Dog was happy to share the mic with the new kid for the rest of night.

Within weeks, Tupac met Demetrius's friends and fell into a crew that consisted of Demetrius; aspiring rappers Ryan D and Ant Dog; music producer DJ Darren Page, who went by "Gable"; and beatboxer Terry August. All a few years older than Tupac, these young men had already finished high school and set themselves to making their music dreams come true.

With Tupac in the fold, they started their own group and called themselves O.N.E., for One Nation Emcees. To make it official, they ordered medallions featuring the group's name, fastened to African-style necklaces in green, red, and black leather. Armed with Gable's drum machine, keyboard, 4-track recording system, and turntables, they turned Demetrius's stepfather's apartment into a home recording studio and got to work. All-night recording sessions also meant the apartment could serve as a place for Tupac to crash each night; soon he was sleeping on the couch as much as he was at the Pratts'.

Tupac stood out among the group for his naïveté about West Coast ways. It made for a kind of cultural exchange program, with Tupac schooling the group in Black history as they helped him acclimate to his new world. “He knew all about Blackness, about things that we didn’t know about,” Gable recalls. But “he didn’t know much about street life in Marin City, or the West Coast at all for that matter. We tried to tell him how to dress, how to act, what to say…. He taught us a lot about Malcolm X and Mandela, and we taught him a lot about the streets.”

Most of these new acquaintances couldn’t figure out Tupac’s style. In a world of Members Only jackets and tracksuits, Tupac didn’t quite fit the picture. But the difference went beyond fashion. Marin City was a hard place to blend into, and Tupac’s sensitivity and the range of his interests didn’t always fit the mode. He was a young man steeped in the Black intellectual tradition, passionate about poetry, in love with Don McLean’s “Vincent” as much as LL Cool J’s “Radio.” There was nothing guilty in the pleasure he took from *Les Misérables,* no contradiction between morning rap sessions and afternoon rehearsals for a Stravinsky ballet. But now, as if jumping suddenly into an ice pool, he was thrown into an environment where some of those passions seemed lost on his peers. “I didn’t fit in. I was the outsider,” Tupac recalled. “I dressed like a hippie; they teased me all the time. I couldn’t play basketball. I didn’t know who [any professional] basketball players were. I thought I was weird because I was writing poetry and I hated myself. I used to keep it a secret. I was really a nerd.”

Marin City’s geographical isolation made it hard to connect with new friends outside the community, to explore beyond its streets on public transportation. Most of Tupac’s new friends, all a few years older, already had their driver’s licenses and cars. Tupac thought that if he practiced enough it would be easy to pass the California driver’s license test. So even though he didn’t yet have a license, he often asked his friends if he could borrow their cars.

One day he asked Ryan for the keys to his ’72 Cadillac Coupe DeVille, saying he just wanted to cruise around Marin City while Ryan hung out with his girlfriend. Ryan agreed, not knowing that Tupac had zero experience operating a moving vehicle. It didn't take him long to realize his mistake. "I looked out the window," Ryan recalled, "and all of a sudden my car was parked the wrong way on the street and he was about to go over the ledge into the dirt. Tupac was backing up, trying to straighten himself out."

Ryan ran out of the house. "Tupac, what the hell are you doin'?" All Ryan heard coming from his car was Tupac laughing loudly. Ryan ran toward the car. "Man, you tryin' to tear my car up."

Tupac knew he didn't have any promising paths to owning a car. He didn't have the cash to buy one himself, nor did he have a parent with a car, or even, for that matter, a parent who had any cash. Once again, he felt like he was less fortunate than even those who didn't have much. Even the knowledge that poverty was endemic in many urban Black communities couldn't always soften the blow or ease the hurt. Being the poorest of the poor took its toll. Years later he recalled, "I didn't have no money, and that's what used to fuck me up. All through my time there they used to dis me. I got love, but the kind of love you would give a dog or a neighborhood crack fiend. They liked me 'cause I was at the bottom."

New city, same old realities. Financial instability continued to compound. The wealth that surrounded Marin City's Black population on all sides created a divide that was similar to, yet starker than, the one he'd seen across Greenmount Avenue in Baltimore. Tupac had learned from Afeni and Mutulu of the disproportionate wealth gaps in America, of the capitalist power structure and how it hindered the lives of the marginalized and underserved. In Marin City, seeing these ideas made brutally plain in the landscape, Tupac's worldview continued to evolve. In an interview he did later that year, he said, "If there was no money and everything depended on your moral standards, and the way you behaved and the way that you treated people, we'd be millionaires. We'd be rich. But since it's not like that, then we're stone broke…. [The] only thing that I'm bitter about is growin' up poor, 'cause I missed out on a lot of things." At seventeen, this aspect of his life rang out: "That's the only bad thing, it's poverty. If I hated anything, it'd be that."

But there were other challenges in the move to Marin City. One was finding companions who wanted to spend their time discussing the political issues that he was passionate about. Left to process these thoughts on his own, his spiral notebooks and composition books grew more important in Marin City. They served as his sounding board as he wrestled with the realities of the world, jotting down his thoughts and translating them into to poetry and rap verses. Friends remember seeing more than ten of his notebooks stacked on the coffee table in Demetrius's apartment at one time. Darrell Roary, a close friend Tupac met while living in Marin City, recalled, "He used to carry a notebook around with him everywhere he went. Everywhere. You know how a kid carries around a favorite blanket or a football? That's how he was."

Weeks passed as Tupac settled in with his new Marin City crew. Daily all-in-fun roasting sessions ensued as his new friends laughed about the gold dye in his hair, or his "Gumby" cut, and he in turn joked about their Jheri curls. They also discovered that their coastal differences weren't limited to style. One night on the Front, someone lit up a small joint. Tupac just stared and laughed. "Really?" he asked, looking skeptical. "Naw, y'all need to get with this here." He held up a cigar for them all to see before he surgically slit it down the side to empty the tobacco. Then he held the hollow cigar up, showcasing it proudly. "Blunts. This is how we do it back east." He eyed their weed. "Gimme that," he said. His friends gave him some, but not enough to fill the extra-large brown cigar casing. He continued to roll it up anyway. He couldn't wait to fire up the blunt and pass it around to his new friends. Eagerly, he waited for everyone's approval and pats on the back. Instead, they all choked—they were smoking more cigar paper than weed.

Tupac also brought west with him his deep distrust of law enforcement and his willingness to confront the police. Because the Marin County Sheriff's Department was less than one-eighth of a mile from the Front, deputy sheriffs frequently circled by, hoping to sniff out drug deals or other illegal behavior. Tupac hated it. He thought the practice was an invasion of their space and privacy. His new friends often looked the other way and tried to discourage him from inviting police into their business, but Tupac was obstinate. He glared at the sheriffs in the green-and-white patrol cars as they crept by, just waiting for one of them to approach him, his eyes burning with revulsion.

This urge to confront authority had deep roots within him, going back to those early household conversations about FBI and police harassment, the covert and illegal practices of COINTELPRO, and the systemic inequities of America's legal system. Then there were the more specific and detailed dialogues about what had happened to Geronimo, Assata, and Mutulu. Swirling with these deeply personal connections were the stories Afeni had told Tupac and Sekyiwa as part of their education: the horrors of slavery, the unfairness of the U.S. Constitution, the psychological effects of Jim Crow, and "separate-but-equal" schools, bathrooms, and water fountains. She taught her children to stand up against all that was wrong in their country—to stand up as Nat Turner did, as Rosa Parks did, as Stokely Carmichael and Huey P. Newton did.

For all these reasons, Tupac refused to simply write off the effects on society of America's darkest chapters. He was actively infuriated by it. He lived in the moment of it, carrying it on his shoulders and in his heart. He went to sleep with it every night and awoke to it every morning. As the sheriffs cruised slowly around Drake Avenue to Cole Drive, the circular main streets of Marin City, Tupac perceived them as sharks in the water, preparing to attack. He would not tolerate harassment under any circumstances. "Tupac hated police," Ryan recalled. "That was Afeni. He got that from his family. That was real. And I always respected that. I just wished sometimes he would tone it down because he would draw unnecessary heat. I was like, 'You know, we can keep walking.' But he'd start cussing them out."

His refusal to stand down led to inevitable confrontations. One day, a pair of Marin County sheriffs on patrol spotted him waiting at the bus stop. He returned their stares. By the time their car swooped up beside him, Tupac was already mouthing off. Within minutes, he found himself handcuffed in the back of the police car. On the way to the station, one of the sheriffs asked whether he was in a gang, assuming the O.N.E. medallion around Tupac's neck signaled a specific gang affiliation. Tupac explained that O.N.E. was the name of his rap group, One Nation Emcees. The sheriffs didn't believe him. They brought him to the station and threw him in a holding cell while they searched their California "gang" handbook for a gang called O.N.E. Finally, unable to locate any such group, they had to release him.

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Tupac had no one to push him to get to school for the first day of classes. Finally, a month after the school year commenced, on October 11, he made his way to the campus of the local high school to begin his senior year. Unlike the city schools he'd attended in the past, surrounded by a sea of concrete, Tamalpais High School sat amid a valley of redwood trees in the small, well-to-do town of Mill Valley. Each morning, Tupac and the rest of the Marin City students hopped on the 8:00 A.M. Golden Gate Transit bus that took them less than ten minutes northwest to a stop just steps away from the school's entrance. There they would join a predominantly white student body of roughly one thousand students, where they represented less than 5 percent of the school's population.

That eight-minute journey traversed worlds: Traveling by bus from Marin City to Mill Valley was like going from East Harlem to the Upper East Side. From Greenmount East to Roland Park in Baltimore. From Crenshaw to Beverly Hills. Along the route, egrets waded through the muddy shores in low tides while seagulls soared above, all sights that contributed to Marin's coastal charm. What made the differences even more distinct to those on the bus was that the cities were directly adjacent. In an ideal world, the two communities might have blended together into one big, beautiful landscape. But they didn't. Mill Valley never wanted much to do with Marin City, and for that reason, Marin City returned the sentiment. Tamalpais High School, known by locals as Tam High, was the only place both communities had a reason to come together, though it was evident across the sprawling campus that a racial divide remained in full force.

Tupac didn't care. He was never one to let any barrier or racial difference hinder him from gravitating to the art-minded and creative people in any new environment. It didn't take long for him to find a spot in the Ensemble Theatre Company, Tam's celebrated drama department. On that first day in October, Tupac entered Ruby Scott Theater and joined a circle of students. Tam's drama teacher, David Smith, introduced him—pronouncing his name correctly, he noted—and Tupac flashed a friendly smile, thanking everyone for welcoming him and saying how happy he was to be there. "This is really great," he said. "Thank you for this." Then he sat down on the floor, his ever-present spiral notebook open on his lap. It was as if he'd come home from a years-long trip and settled back into all of what was familiar.

Through the school's drama program he met a fellow student, a biracial girl named Cosima Knez. Quickly, he fell for her. Tupac was sold on her golden-brown skin and her curly blond hair, and the two spent hours getting to know each other at the Tam Deli across the street from the school. They talked about their lives, and Tupac shared his poetry and his lyrics with her. His crush increased as their friendship deepened. "He used to sit there [at the deli] and write his poetry and songs," Cosima recalled. "He was just so deep for somebody his age. And I don't think at the time I realized it. He was different, very different. He was so many years ahead, intelligence-wise."

At first, much to Tupac's dismay, Cosima wanted to keep things platonic. "She told me I was too nice," he related not long afterward. "I couldn't believe it. It wouldn't work because I was too nice." Tupac expressed his frustrations to anyone nearby. Tam classmate Christian Mills remembers spending every morning in the school library with Tupac because neither of them wanted to take third-year Spanish. "Tupac and I would sit there every day for months, from eight to eight forty-five, we'd sit in the back of the library," Mills recalled. "He'd wear the same thing every day, jeans and a jean jacket, and he had a Gumby haircut back then. He'd be reeking—he loved his smokes in the morning—and we'd have our coffee. We would talk about Shakespeare. He would be writing his lyrics and he would talk about Cosima Knez. He loved him some Cosima Knez."

Most likely he was writing letters to Cosima during library period as well, relying on the written word to win her over. He would write close to twenty love letters to her over the course of that next year. In the end, the letters worked their magic. "I was intrigued by him," she recalled. "I kept coming back for more because I was curious. We ended up having a very special relationship."

During this time, Tupac met and started to hang out with Kendrick Wells, a Hunters Point native who was three years older, living in his own apartment a few towns north, in San Rafael. He soon learned that Kendrick's apartment was a bachelor pad with a revolving door and the romantic possibilities for Tupac poured in. One night, he and Kendrick and two girls were casually hanging out on the couch watching a movie. The four sat in front of the television, the girls giggling and reciting lines from *Grease 2*. Kendrick, on a mission that didn't include watching TV, pulled Tupac away into the back of the apartment. He told Tupac he had a plan to sway the girls' attention from the TV and onto them. Tupac was in. But when they returned to the living room, they found it to be harder than they thought. The girls were still deeply involved in this favorite movie of theirs. Instead of trying to help Kendrick in his plan to get the girls to forget about the movie, Tupac started a debate on which was better, *Grease* or *Grease 2*. Then when one of the musical numbers blared through the television speakers, one of the girls turned up the volume, jumped off the couch, and started a dance party. Knowing most of the moves, the girls imitated the dancers and sang loudly. Tupac couldn't help himself. He joined in. The three of them proceeded to stage their own little musical right there in the center of Kendrick's living room. Completely defeated, Kendrick shook his head in disbelief and threw in the towel.

Within his first year living in Marin City, Tupac found a part-time job at Round Table Pizza in Mill Valley. He frequently put work before class, sometimes even taking shifts during school hours. Still, just as at BSA, he never missed drama class. Weeks into the school year, drama teacher David Smith announced the upcoming annual production honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. The play was written by a student teacher and would honor Dr. King through scenes that highlighted his theories on nonviolent resistance. Because the final performance would be staged at the Marin Civic Center, and all five high schools in the county's school district would attend, Smith stressed the heavy time commitments required by all involved in the production. When he asked who was willing to make the commitment, Tupac raised his hand immediately.

Tupac was cast as a couple with a classmate named Liza. A white girl with long brown hair and a petite frame, Liza lived in Mill Valley and had been raised with an open mind and a big heart. When the students were divided up they were asked to begin working on improvisation skills. Tupac and Liza chatted as they practiced. "Well, it's great we're doing this," he said, "but no one has mentioned Malcolm X or any of the other great leaders."

Liza looked at him, confused. "Malcolm X?"

"Yeah, Malcolm X."

"Who's that?"

"He was a strong man who stood for the cause and the people," Tupac explained. "He wasn't afraid of white government."

Tupac wasn't surprised that Liza didn't know who Malcolm was. Even in his brief time at Tam High, he could tell that the curriculum was no different from that of most other high schools in the country, where only the most common Black historical figures were taught. He didn't blame Liza for not knowing but instead blamed the system for not teaching.

That year Tupac spoke openly about his wide-ranging thoughts regarding the standard American curriculum with documentary filmmaker Jamie Cavanaugh, who was beginning interviews for a film project that would detail the lives of urban youth over the course of a decade. Tupac was excited to take part and be interviewed—so excited that when he realized his scheduled interview time was during a workday, and his boss wouldn't allow him time off, he quit his job at Round Table on the spot.

Cavanaugh captured Tupac's vision at a critical juncture. Up until this moment, Tupac's activism sought to tackle the issues of urban blight, from the rallies he helped stage to bring awareness to teen pregnancy to the songs he wrote about the importance of reading. As he matured in Marin City, he started not only to look for the solutions to a marginalized existence but also to focus on the origins of the problem. Increasingly, he wanted to shed light on the events that produced a more painful and difficult road for Black Americans, a road that was filled with more hurdles than the one their white counterparts were on.

What was clear in his assessment was that the education system was profoundly broken. "I think there should be a different curriculum in each and every neighborhood," he told Cavanaugh. "Because I'm going to Tamalpais High and I'm learning about the basics, but they're not basic for me….To get us ready for today's world, that's not helping." He continues, "There should be a class on police brutality. There should be a class on Apartheid. There should be a class on racism in America. There should be a class on why people are hungry…but there are not. There are classes on…gym. Let's learn volleyball!"

Afeni finally arrived in Marin City in November via Greyhound bus, carrying just a purse and a suitcase. She had left everything from their Baltimore life behind. That life had not been the saving grace her sister, Jean, had hoped for when the family left New York. Instead it had worn away at Afeni. Between the rats, the constant lack of money, the abusive relationship, and the growing disconnect from the Panther activism that had given her life meaning, Afeni became more fragile than ever. In Baltimore, her drug use continued, even as she barely kept herself and her children afloat. But she still believed it wasn't a problem, and that everything would be okay if they could just start over in California.

She arrived at the Pratts' apartment and found the door locked, the lights out, and no one home. She asked a few passersby where they might be. In Marin City, that's how things were. If you needed a ride, someone would give it to you. If you needed your kids to come home, someone would alert them and they'd be home in minutes. Like a game of telephone, a request to find out someone's whereabouts was simple, and a definite perk of this small-town community. No sooner than Afeni put the word out that she had arrived and was looking for her kids did they come running up the stairs.

Afeni had barely arrived before Ashaki told her that she was letting go of the apartment and moving; the Shakurs would have to find a new place to live. Afeni immediately began looking for a job to make rent money. Until they could afford something, Sekyiwa and Afeni would stay with Ashaki's friend Gwen, who had three young daughters with whom Sekyiwa had grown close. And Demetrius told Tupac, who had already taken up residence on his couch, that he was welcome to stay full-time until his mom was able to find a place. Afeni remembers, "What Demetrius was doing was letting all the runaways, and all the people, the young kids who didn't have a place [live there]…His house was officially the place where people stayed when they didn't have a place to stay."

But such comfort would not last long. Soon after the turn of the New Year, Tupac's friendship with Demetrius came to an abrupt end. One evening when Demetrius wasn't home, Tupac decided to throw a wild, out-of-control party. The fancy glass coffee table in the center of the living room got smashed, and worse, the cops broke down the door to Demetrius's precious recording studio. Frustrated, Demetrius flung Tupac's Malcolm X albums into a tree like Frisbees and told him he had to move out.

Luckily, Afeni was soon approved for a small two-bedroom apartment on Drake Avenue in the same public housing complex where the Pratts had lived. The Shakurs were together under one roof once again. Sekyiwa and Afeni settled into the bedrooms, and Tupac took the couch.

There were some days Tupac would ask himself whether he should bother going to school that day. One morning, Tupac heard an announcement on KMEL, the popular Bay Area radio station, that Flavor Flav from Public Enemy was on his way to the studio for an interview. Now, here was an *opportunity*. Tupac had already grown to revere the group's socially charged lyrics and political intensity. He knew that if he could get to the radio station, he could find a way to meet Flavor Flav. He weighed his opportunity against responsibility. Go to school and take a test?

Or meet Flav? Tupac thought, If I meet Flav, he could maybe help me do this rap thing.

A few hours later Tupac found himself at KMEL taking pictures with one of his idols. He came home with a cherished photo of himself and Flav, which he tucked safely away with the picture he still kept of Jada from Baltimore.

On the days Tupac did decide to go to school, he continued to impress his fellow drama students. Liza remembered that his acting "process" was erratic but that his results were always a success. "If someone's process was off, their product was usually off," she said. "I don't even know what his process was. He'd be late for rehearsal. He wouldn't show up for rehearsal. Half the time he wouldn't know his lines, he'd just be making stuff up." Liza laughed as she recounted the days of sharing a stage with Tupac. "But his product was always so exciting. People were so excited watching him 'cause you never knew what he was going to do or what was going to happen."

His talent had a dramatic effect throughout the school. David Smith remembered Tupac asking if he could perform a piece by Shakespeare or Chekhov. "He performed in one of Chekhov's plays, *The Bear,*" Smith remembered. "I remember worrying about whether or not he was going to get his lines together. He was always such a pleasant person, but he never had his stuff together lines-wise. But then he stepped onstage that night and dazzled everybody in the place with that charismatic charm."

His English teacher, Ms. Owens, often engaged the kids by asking her students to take turns reading out loud. One afternoon during the Shakespeare unit, she assigned Tupac the part of Othello. Immediately she was taken by his grasp of the Shakespearean language and his expert recitation. "It was absolutely, hands down, one of the most stellar performances of Shakespeare, let alone *Othello,* that I have ever heard," she recalled. "When he got to the scene where Othello is having a critical argument with himself about whether or not he's going to snuff out Desdemona, he read it brilliantly. I stopped the class and I said to my students, ‘You will never, in your lifetime, hear an Othello read as well as you have just heard it now.”

The biggest performance was still to come. For weeks, the drama class had been preparing for the annual Martin Luther King, Jr., tribute, and now it was just days away. They would stage three performances. The first two would be held at Tam High’s Ruby Scott Theater, but the final performance would be in front of thousands at the Marin Civic Auditorium.

On the night of the first scheduled performance, Liza wanted to get into character by rehearsing lines before the curtain went up, but she couldn’t find Tupac anywhere. When he finally arrived, late, he ran toward her and playfully dogpiled her, sending both of them tumbling to the ground. It was his way of showing his friendly affection, but Liza wasn’t so relaxed. She pushed him off her and tried to get him to rehearse. “I was all serious and trying to get myself ready for the play,” Liza recalled, “but he didn’t even think twice about it. I tried to get mad at him, but he’d always make me laugh.” Despite Tupac’s lack of rehearsal, the first night’s performance was a success.

On the second night, though, things didn’t go as smoothly. Tupac spent the early part of the day in Novato, a town thirty minutes north of Mill Valley. He, Ryan, and another friend, Pogo, went to visit friends. Halfway through the day they ended up in a Safeway supermarket, where one of them scored a bottle of Jack Daniel’s, and then walked to Hamilton Air Force Base, taking turns chugging the whiskey straight from the bottle. As they walked along the street, looking for trouble, they found their way into a recreational basketball game at the local school.

When the sun started to go down, Tupac noticed it was getting late and jumped on the next bus south. He just needed to get to Tam before the curtain went up. As he was transferring to a connecting bus, he overheard an oncoming passenger call someone a “nigger.”

That was all it took.

A fight ensued as Tupac jumped in to defend. By the time it was broken up by the bus driver, the bus that would take Tupac to his high school had pulled away.

At the Ruby Scott Theater, Liza and the cast waited for Tupac. The student teacher and members of the cast grew anxious, as there was no understudy for Tupac's part—the show simply could not begin without him. Eventually, when more than thirty minutes went by and Tupac still hadn't arrived, the director had no choice but to deliver bad news to the audience. Groans and sighs sounded throughout the theater as an announcement was made that the play would be canceled. As the crowd filed out, students backstage exchanged looks of disappointment and consternation. Moments later the small theater was empty. Tupac's morning library companion, Christian Mills, who was also in drama class, recalled this as unprecedented. "That had never happened in my four years at Tam, that somebody just didn't show up."

Liza and her family got into their car and were headed out of the school's parking lot when they noticed someone sprinting toward their car. It was Tupac.

"Liza! Wait!" Tupac yelled, running to catch up with the car. Before Liza could even ask what could possibly have happened to make him stand up the entire cast, he began a dramatic account of the reason he was late. As he relayed the details of the incident and told her that while he was on the bus, a man called another passenger a racist and derogatory word, Tupac was clearly still in defense mode. He told Liza he *had* to stand up for the man.

Liza's family was in the car. They had come to see the play after hearing her rave about the "new kid" in her drama class for weeks. "Oh well! Now my family will never know how good you are," she teased.

"Yes, they will." Tupac looked inside her car, let everyone have his best smile, and said, "I'll make it up to you, I promise." Then he ran off.

A moment later, though, he would give a totally different excuse. When he walked into the Ruby Scott Theater, he ran into another of his castmates, a schoolmate named Alexa Koenig. She asked him what happened. Koenig recounted, "He told me that he was not going to show up for a white school in the ways that white people had not shown up for Black populations in America."

She stood there baffled, trying to process a response she was not expecting. A flat tire? Sure. Maybe he ran out of gas? Anything but what he'd just laid on her. She considered him a friend of hers after they'd bonded over buck-fifty coffee at the Denny's a few miles up the freeway. She couldn't understand how he could leave her, his friend, hanging, and then give a reason so charged. "I remember being so angry at him for daring to not show up, to just leave us all hanging and not even give us a warning for why he wasn't present," she said years later. "He told me he wanted to make a statement with his art. Of course now, with time, and a bigger social context and awareness, I understand that so much of what he was doing was trying to wake people up to social injustice."

A pattern was developing. Once again, Tupac felt it was his duty to defend one of his people, whether it be a family member or a stranger, from a racial attack or police harassment despite the consequences it might bring to his own life and those around him. To him, the importance of his actions started to outweigh the consequence.

For the King tribute's final performance, on January 30, 1989, at the Marin Civic Auditorium, Liza met Tupac in the parking lot in front of the school so they could carpool together and also to avoid the possibility of Tupac missing another bus.

"Glad you showed up this time," she said, laughing.

As they pulled into the parking lot of the Marin Civic Auditorium twenty minutes later, Tupac asked Liza, "Are you nervous?"

There were hundreds of high school students around the county who were on their way to the auditorium to see the play. It was always more difficult to perform in front of peers. They were the toughest crowd. "We're under-rehearsed, Tupac," Liza said candidly. "Of course I'm nervous."

Tupac smiled at her. "Just think *King*."

Liza laughed and rolled her eyes at him. And once again he dogpiled her on their way inside the theater.

09

PANTHER POWER

1988–1989

> Fathers of our country never cared for me
> They kept my ancestors shackled up in slavery.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

Even with the lure and excitement of Tam High School's reputable drama department and the promise of honing his craft, on many mornings Tupac decided to forgo the bus trip to Mill Valley and stay in Marin City. Feeling as though he had enough math and science classes by then—and rapidly losing faith in the school's overall curriculum, especially in the history department—his primary focus shifted to finding ways to make money and survive.

On one of those mornings, he walked past a white woman sitting in the expansive dry-grass field between Hayden's Liquor Store and the local elementary school. She was reading Winnie Mandela's memoir, *Part of My Soul Went with Him.*

"Oh, yeah, that's a good book," Tupac said, giving his approval.

The woman was Leila Steinberg, an educator who lived in Santa Rosa, a town forty-five minutes north. Leila spent her days commuting to public schools across the Bay Area to stage cultural awareness assemblies in connection with Young Imaginations, a multicultural education nonprofit.

Once again, Tupac's reputation preceded him. After a moment, Leila realized she had seen him briefly on the dance floor the night before at a local nightclub. And then she knew he was the new kid that some of her Marin City students had been praising. "You have to meet this new kid, Tupac!" one of them had told her. "He's a rapper and he'd be perfect for our writing group."

Eight years older than Tupac, and with an educator's mindset, Leila felt compelled to ask him why he wasn't in school. His reply made an undeniable first impression. "I'm not going today. It's boring. I feel like I need to teach my teachers."

Leila explained that she was on her way to teach one of her multicultural assemblies just up the street at Bayside Elementary School. Of course, Tupac was quick to challenge this woman, who appeared to be white but was actually of Latina and Turkish descent. "What is it that you have that qualifies you to teach about multicultural anything?" But then, instead of waiting for an answer, he quickly retracted his challenge and decided to give her a chance. "Let me come and check it out," he said.

They headed over to the school together. That day she was teaching a lesson in music history, and Tupac stood quietly in the back of the classroom, building a critique based on his observations. After class, as the two walked out together, Tupac shared his thoughts.

Intrigued by his blunt assumptions and captivated by his charm and curiosity, Leila invited him to a poetry circle she was hosting at her home later that afternoon. Tupac accepted. A poetry circle where writers gathered and shared their love for the written word? That must have sounded much better than sitting in a chemistry or math class. They drove an hour north on Interstate 101 to Santa Rosa, located in Sonoma County. The suburban sprawl of strip malls and car dealerships flashed past the windows as the two continued their exchange of ideas on the state of education in America.

Tupac told Leila he was a rapper and had been working on a few songs. "You want to hear one?" he asked, taking advantage of any opportunity to perform for an interested and captive audience. He bobbed his head to an imaginary beat and delivered an impromptu version of his song "Panther Power," giving off enough energy and conviction to capture a small crowd. Leila listened intently, awed by the lyrical content:

As real as it seems, the American Dream
Ain't nothing but another calculated scheme
To get us locked up, shot up, and back in chains

To deny us of the future, rob our names
…kept my history a mystery, but now I see
The American Dream wasn't meant for me
'Cause lady liberty's a hypocrite, she lied to me
Promised me freedom, education, equality
…never gave me nothing but slavery
And now look at how dangerous you made me
Calling me a mad man 'cause I'm strong and bold
With this gun full of knowledge of the lies you told.

That evening at the poetry circle, Tupac settled into Leila's modest home, excited to meet a new group of friends, people of the same age and from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, people with whom he would spend future months exchanging ideas, in writing and in life.

Everyone took turns introducing themselves to him, and then Tupac spoke. By then, his creative agenda was set. Through his poetry and lyrics, he was going to become a change activator in society; he would improve the lives of the less fortunate and forgotten youth.

"Everyone in the room was in love with Tupac instantly," Leila recalled. "They fell in love with his talent. He had that impact. He shined."

Ray Tyson, known as "Rock T," was among the writers Tupac met that night. "The poetry circle was a freestyle writing circle," Ray recalled. "You could write raps, poetry, you could write stories. Or you could just write your thoughts. It was where everybody could come and forget about the world for a minute and do your thing." Leila was excited for Tupac to meet Ray, with whom she suspected he would hit it off. That night, Tupac performed a quick rendition of "Panther Power" for Ray, who in turn performed one of his own songs. Leila was right: Their connection was instant.

"We were a small group," Leila recalled. "It was Ray and two others, aspiring poets and writers, Kenyatta and Jacinta. They were all Tupac's sparring partners. They were his peers." The group bonded right away over their common interest in using their creativity to foster social change. Friendships like these, with a diverse social circle of Black brothers and sisters who shared many of his sentiments about society, were Tupac's lifeblood. They kept him on track.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Tupac returned for writing sessions, which were interspersed with long and deep discussions. Tupac shared his beliefs on the state of the Black community and what he felt were the reasons for its setbacks, expounding that many of its members hadn't yet healed from the effects of slavery. During slavery, he explained, Black mothers were forced to discredit their children in order to protect them. It was part of a plan to make them weak, because weakness was not attractive at the slave market. To lessen their chances of their babies being sold young and snatched away by white slave holders, mothers had to verbally abuse them, feed them less, and, in the extreme, kill them. Tupac believed that this tradition of systematically weakening Black children carried on throughout history, causing Black mothers to withhold praise from their children, especially their sons. Consequently, Leila recalls "Tupac talking at seventeen, saying the whole self-esteem of the Black community, as a result of slavery, is completely off balance."

Leila remembers that he told the group, "The white community created a situation in this country and then didn't understand the damage or the process. And so with five hundred years of lies and of not telling the truth in history, you have this festering wound that has begun to seep and to affect everybody."

Tupac's new friends were enamored by his philosophies, especially Leila, a child of the '60s who came from an activist family, with parents who had taken her to marches at Elysian Park to stand proudly with Cesar Chavez's labor movement. She, too, was born into a family who looked for change in the world and knew that this commonality would help forge a strong friendship with Tupac. He was a vital addition to their circle, a group of people who, Leila recalled, "were young and dumb enough to believe" they could change the world.

During one session, Leila informed the group that the local chapter of the NAACP was planning an event called "100 Black Men" to honor the path of Black men in America and the organization's mentoring efforts. She had been working closely with them over the past years to provide social justice–related entertainment. Now she gave the members of her creative circle the chance to perform a poetry piece at the event. She assigned a specific subject for everyone to write about and invited those who were interested to come back the following Friday to start rehearsing.

Right away, Tupac objected to Leila's proposed topic. "Do you always tell everyone what to write about?" he asked.

Leila was taken aback by this unexpected challenge. "Yes."

"And everyone listens to you?"

Leila nodded. "It's my circle."

"But why do you get to decide?"

"Because we all write about something together, so we can share different perspectives."

"That's all good, but why do you decide the subject?"

"This is your first time here, why you trying to embarrass me?" Leila asked, exasperated.

Her exasperation soon turned to admiration. Though the other artists and writers were dynamic and talented, too, Tupac was the first one to challenge her instruction.

"Well, what do *you* want to write about?" Leila asked.

Tupac didn't hesitate. "Pain!" he exclaimed. Leila learned quickly that this was more than just a topic challenge—Tupac was taking over. "That's what we're writing about. Everyone write about your most painful experience or what pain means to you."

He began to write fervently and soon produced a poem entitled "If There Be Pain…":

If there be pain,
all u need 2 do
is call on me 2 be with u
And before u hang up the phone
u will no longer be alone
Together we can never fall

Because our love will conquer all

If there be pain,
reach out 4 a helping hand
And I shall hold u wherever I am
Every breath I breathe will be into u
4 without u here my joy is through
my life was lived through falling rain
so call on me if there be pain

"In three minutes he could do a masterpiece," Leila recalled.

During writing sessions, the group also discussed their literary tastes. Tupac showed off his wide-ranging interests, reciting a passage from *Moby-Dick* or adapting lines of *Macbeth* before quickly switching genres to offer his opinion of Iceberg Slim's memoir, *Pimp*. Some days he'd pique the group's interest with what he learned from a book on Shiatsu body work, the art of finger-pressure massage. He told the group that to heal yourself, you needed to concentrate on the physical aspects of healing as much as the mental and psychological. Together, they explored and absorbed books like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead, The Phenomenon of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and *Ponder on This,* a collection of writings by New Age philosopher Alice Bailey.

The group shared music, too, and when Tupac noticed that someone didn't appreciate a song he enjoyed, he would work to ensure that they gained a full understanding of the artist's intention. Whether it was Prince or Sting or even one of his favorite musicals, Tupac would make his friends listen until they appreciated the music as much as he did—especially if it was his favorite CD, the soundtrack to *Les Misérables*. Even in Marin City, he proudly carried the CD around in his back pocket, letting anyone who would listen know that it was his favorite.

His mind never stopped, flying in and out of varying worlds and circumstances. Leila recalled, "To be able to go from the classics like *Moby-Dick* to Iceberg Slim to reciting the poetry of Khalil Gibran and then even talk shit to a passing police officer was who he was as a person."

Such examples were not hypothetical. One day, during a poetry circle session, a police officer knocked on the door. This was becoming a common occurrence—ever since Tupac started spending time at Leila's, the police had been coming around to settle noise complaints because Tupac liked his music *loud.*

As Leila stood at the door apologizing, Tupac peered over her shoulder. "Wa's up, Officer? Is there a problem?" he interjected. "The neighbors' rock is just as loud. You don't give them shit." He ran over to the stereo and turned it down, but then, while the officer stood at the door and talked with Leila, he switched the record, putting on "Fuck tha Police," the current hit by one of his favorite groups, N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitudes). He turned the music back up, not to the highest level, but high enough for the officer to hear. Then he rushed back over to the door.

"Let me know if this is too loud?" Tupac asked with mock politeness. He chuckled, smiled at the officer, and went back to his spiral notebook.

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Leila was not the only one noticing Tupac's potential. During this time, he was contacted by two of Afeni's comrades, Watani Tyehimba and Chokwe Lumumba. Chokwe, an attorney out of Jackson, Mississippi, who had dedicated his life to political activism, knew Afeni from the time she spent working on Geronimo Pratt's case. He was the chairman of the New Afrikan People's Organization (NAPO), a Black nationalist effort that grew out of the revolutionary ideals of the '60s and '70s and whose stated mission was to "permanently break the back of American imperialism." Watani explains, "It was actually our right to self-determination and sovereignty." NAPO's primary objective was to create a national state out of the black belt region: Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Georgia with the goal of "end[ing] color and class discrimination while not abolishing salubrious diversity and to promote self-respect and mutual understanding of all people in society."

Watani had been a leading member of NAPO with Mutulu, a founding member, and remained close to Afeni through the years. Over the recent months, Watani and his two sons had been working diligently with the Center for Black Survival, a community center in South Central Los Angeles that hosted meetings for a youth division of NAPO called the New Afrikan Panthers, which aimed to raise consciousness in Black youth through intensive lectures on Black history and critical-thinking discussions that evoked pride and resilience.

Having kept tabs on Tupac over the years through Afeni, Chokwe and Watani considered him a promising leader and a potential chairman of the youth division. They called him with the proposition. For his part, Tupac showed great interest in the youth program's goals and knew that he wanted to be involved in some capacity. Chokwe started him out selling the organization's newspaper, in the hopes that Tupac could expand readership on the West Coast. He shipped several hundred copies to Marin City, and when they arrived Tupac hit the streets. He found quick success, selling papers everywhere. Leila remembered, "Tupac even had white kids in Sonoma County buying the New Afrikan Panther papers."

Tupac also continued his daily routine of reading the local newspapers, combing through at least two every morning. Sometimes he read the *San Francisco Chronicle,* other days the *Oakland Tribune,* but he read *The New York Times* constantly. His most onerous punishment as a child had turned into a daily habit.

As he pored over the news, he grew fixated by the rising crime rates and surging gun violence in urban areas throughout the country, especially Oakland and South Central Los Angeles. The crack epidemic was spreading, and sales of the dangerous and deadly substance were skyrocketing across the country, reaching a new height in 1988, the year Tupac turned seventeen. Black-on-Black homicide also hit an all-time high. In Oakland, just across the bay from Marin City, homicides were increasing at alarming rates. From 1988 to 1992, the number of homicides per year went from 112 to 175.

The devastation faced by urban communities was compounded by laws whose brutal consequences fell disproportionately on Black men. When Congress passed a $900 million legislative initiative that would make capital punishment applicable to drug crimes in which offenders “intentionally” caused death, and when it passed laws that would allow the use of illegally obtained evidence in drug trials, the result was exponentially more Black men serving life in prison or counting time on death row. By the end of the 1980s, few urban communities were left unscarred by the twin scourges of crack-related violence and a weaponized criminal justice system.

While Tupac had sometimes disagreed with Afeni’s teachings in Baltimore—her stance on a standard high school education being the key to success, or her preference for Malcolm’s philosophies over Martin Luther King, Jr.’s—as he matured, his beliefs became more aligned with his mother’s. Her lessons had always been the bedrock of his activism—her warnings of society’s ills, the stories of her comrades’ fates, and her descriptions of the systemic oppression that weighed down and destroyed Black communities. Those lessons were like a wave that grew in size and force throughout his life. The harsh realities of the daily news made it all the more real, heightening the stakes. These startling reports, the litany of tragic homicides, broke Tupac’s heart, giving his burning desire to make change an almost desperate urgency.

In a song he wrote in this period called “My Block,” he painted a vivid, emotional portrait of crumbling, crime-ridden Black communities:

And I can’t help but to wonder why, so many young kids had to die
Caught strays from AK’s in a drive by
Swollen pride and homicide don’t coincide

Tupac also grew more fascinated by war and conflict as he read about international affairs, especially in the Middle East. He and his friends frequently discussed and analyzed the heated, unending conflict between Palestine and Israel. Tupac was fascinated that the Holy Land, the most sacred land, had come to be one of the most volatile regions on the planet. South Africa and the oppressive violence of Apartheid was also a hot-button subject. “He was someone at a young age that liked to discuss and examine systems of oppression,” explained Leila. But he held out hope; he and the members of his poetry circle would talk not just about revolution but also *resolution,* and the possibility of global reconciliation.

The connections Tupac forged at Leila’s poetry circle tipped the balance of Tupac’s daily decision of whether to attend school. He started catching the bus even less frequently in favor of seeking a ride north to Santa Rosa so he could spend the day designing and studying his own curriculum. Leila’s house became a creative den for him, Ray, and several other teenagers. They wrote together, tried to give each other spiritual healing, and sat in circles and massaged each other, using the techniques they read about. They shared their dreams with each other and devised plans for their careers.

Tupac even took the liberty of suggesting a new name for Ray. “My name was MC Rock T and Tupac was MC New York,” said Ray Luv. “We were looking for ways to differentiate ourselves from everybody else. Today you have some artists who use their actual name, but back in those days everyone had a moniker that represented where you were from. In New York, the cool, swagged-out ones who had the fly gear, a lot of those people added ‘Luv’ to their name…Run-D.M.C. was Run Luv. Tupac started to call me Ray Luv—it was just the natural progression.”

Ray Luv and Tupac decided to merge their creative visions and start a new group. They named themselves Strictly Dope and started writing and recording songs together. Soon, the two became inseparable, bonding on the drives back and forth from Ray’s place in Santa Rosa to Marin City, and during long walks to the Big G supermarket, where Afeni often sent them for groceries. The route took them along the edge of wealthy, white Sausalito, and as they passed by Sausalito’s harbors and seaside businesses, they often talked about their dreams. Seeing the disparity between their circumstances and the wealth surrounding them, Ray recalls they used to promise each other that “one day shit ain’t gonna be like this.”

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By April of 1989, Tupac had officially dropped out of high school. He'd been in Marin City for less than a year, still plagued by instability in ways that kept him from finding focus at school. "I didn't have enough credits," he later explained. "Right before I was about to graduate they was like you gotta come back next year and get a health credit and a physical education credit. I was like, 'Oh hell naw.' I had just barely made it with money coming to school and lunch money. I said I gotta get paid. I gotta find a way to make a living."

The news that he wouldn't graduate did not sit well with Afeni. "I don't ever want you to have to rely on welfare!" she told him. He knew in his heart that he wouldn't. He believed not only would he achieve his career goals but he would inspire change among those who were struggling, so that they, too, would not have to rely on welfare. Around this time, he was inspired to write his poem "Government Assistance or My Soul."

It would be like a panther
Asking a panther hunter
4 some meat, all
High school dropouts R NOT DUMB
All unemployed aren't lazy
And there R many days I hunger
But I would go hungry and homeless
Before the American Government gets my soul

With drug deals and dealers always close by, the temptation of quick cash loomed. Later, tall tales of his dealing would grow in the wake of his legend. But his friends from the time were quick to dispel the rumors. "Yeah, somebody might have given him some to sell," recalled Bobby Burton, one of Tupac's friends in Marin City during that time, "but as far as him *actually* selling dope…as far as Tupac being a dealer, no."

"I was broke," Tupac remembered. "I gotta get paid. I gotta find a way to make a living. I tried selling drugs for maybe two weeks. Then the dude was like, 'Ah, man, gimme my drugs back,' 'cause I didn't know how to do it. I'd sell [and if] somebody didn't pay me back I'd be like, 'Oh, it's okay, you don't have to pay me back.' "

Despite, or perhaps because of, his evident inability to hustle drugs, actual dealers ended up feeling protective of him. They saw that his real talents lay in his creativity, and even offered financial support to keep him from running into trouble. "The dope dealers used to just look out for me," he recalled. "They just give me money and be like, 'Don't get involved with this. Get out there and do your dream.' So they was like my sponsors."

One of those "sponsors," just a few years older than Tupac, was Mike Cooley, a cool but down-to-earth brotha with fine features and a medium build. Cooley was introduced to Tupac through his brother. "I had just got out of jail; it was in '89. My brother picked me up and took me to Marin City. We were in Hayden's parking lot. Tupac walked by. My brother told me he was from New York. He said that people around there were treating him bad because he wasn't from around there." When Cooley learned that he had engaged with some of the local dealers to try to sell drugs for them, he felt bad for him. He recalled, "I told my brother 'Call him over here.' I asked Tupac, 'Do you smoke?' He said, 'Hell yeah.' He got in the back seat and we been rockin' ever since."

Over the course of the next few months, Cooley took Tupac under his wing. "I told him 'You stick to the rap game and I'll stick to the dope game.' " Eventually, Tupac started to live temporarily with Cooley, and as always, it didn't take long for him to start imparting his knowledge and passion for any discussion involving Black liberation, equality, and the forward progression of Black people. "Ray Luv and Tupac introduced me to Farrakhan," recalled Cooley. "I never heard of Farrakhan until them. We used to sit and listen to Farrakhan cassette tapes for hours….Tupac said, 'How the fuck yo' ass don't know about Farrakhan?' "

Through Cooley he met Charles Fuller, also known as "Man-Man," one of the East Bay's well-known drug dealers. "He, at that time, needed money to live off and survive," remembered Man-Man. "He came and presented me with a deal. He said he would either write me an album or do an album for me for somewhere between three and ten thousand dollars. For the cash. He said, 'Whatever I need to do I just need cash right now.' Then he freestyled. Used my name in it. I was like, *wow*. I said whatever you need, I got you. I told him right then—I will invest in you 'cause I believe in you."

The support meant everything to Tupac. He no longer had the warm blanket of validation that the environment at BSA once provided, especially Mr. Hicken, who had always affirmed his talent. With no stability at home, Tupac needed this love and support, which extended to having another place to stay. Man-Man recalled, "He was homeless and started to sometimes stay with Cooley around that time."

It was not a record deal, but for the first time, Tupac had people with the financial means to help him survive and develop as an artist, covering the costs of studio time and producer fees. These relationships had a profound effect on him, so much so that he would later immortalize them in his song "Dear Mama":

I hung around with the thugs
and even though they sold drugs
they showed a young brother love.

After dropping out, Tupac lived mostly with Leila or Mike Cooley, but he still came home sometimes to see Afeni and Sekyiwa in Marin City. During these visits, he saw that he wasn't the only one struggling to find stability. Afeni was faltering again, her addiction worsening. One of Tupac's friends, around that time, remembers stopping by Afeni's apartment, where they'd sit at the kitchen table and talk. Afeni would regale them with stories about her past, about the Black Panthers and her efforts to help improve conditions in the communities around New York City. The same friend, who had become one of the known dealers in Marin City, recalled one evening in particular when, as they were leaving, Afeni discreetly summoned him. Out of the corner of his eye, Tupac saw him pass her a rock of crack cocaine. Afeni reached for some money, but he wouldn't take it from her. He thought if he was *giving* it to her, it wouldn't be the same as *selling* it to her.

The moment slipped between him and Tupac as they all said goodbye, walked out the door, and disappeared into the night. "I felt bad," his friend later admitted. "Because you have to remember that's my buddy and that's his mama, you know what I'm saying?" The two of them never talked about it.

Tupac knew that his mother's life path had never been easy. She sometimes stumbled, but she always tried to hold her head high with grace and determination. For this, Tupac cherished her. She was his hero. Yes, she had been absent early in his life to fight "for a greater good." And yes, they fought and yelled at each other and argued their philosophies sometimes. But he understood that this was part of their unique mother–son experience. Above all, he was grateful that she provided him with the most important lessons in life and in history, with values that filled him with pride and self-worth and served as the foundation for the man he was becoming. For all these reasons, her slide into the darkness of drug addiction devastated him. He'd hoped that it would continue to be just an occasional escape from the memories that haunted her, but he increasingly saw that wasn't the case.

One evening as he was headed home to visit Afeni and Sekyiwa, his friends pulled him aside on the street as soon as he got to town. "You better go check on your mom," they whispered. Then as he got closer to Afeni's apartment, a neighbor blurted out, "Hey, someone just sold your mom some rocks."

To have this yelled at him by someone who lived in the area practically knocked the wind out of him. Slowly, he sat down on the edge of the curb and took a deep breath. He started to cry. He told himself that there was a chance what he heard was just a spiteful rumor. He decided to go in and ask Afeni if it was true that she'd bought crack.

She nodded. "Yes, I did. But I'm in control. If it becomes a problem, I'll let you know. It's okay."

But Tupac knew that if word of Afeni's condition had found its way onto the lips of his friends around the neighborhood, it signaled a truth he could no longer ignore. It meant she was far from okay.

Tupac was faced with the biggest contradiction of his life. His mother, the woman who had afforded him an invaluable education, whom he'd put on a pedestal and held in the highest regard, his hero, was losing herself to a vicious and unforgiving addiction. He was wounded, and angry. "After she started smoking dope and all that I, like, lost respect for her," he would admit later.

He tried to work through his emotions in a poem. Written that year, "When Ure Hero Falls" was one of his most poignant and powerful writings:

When your hero falls from grace
all fairytales R uncovered
myths exposed and pain magnified
the greatest pain discovered
U taught me 2 be strong
But I'm confused 2 c u so weak
U said never to give up

The hurt was hard to process, and figuring out what to do next was no easier. Knowing the problem was hardly solving it. At first, all he could do was block out the pain and stay away. But the heaviness in his heart started to wear on him, and within days he called the one person in the world he knew could help: Aunt Jean.

"Can you send for your sister?" he asked her.

Jean's voice sounded with concern. "Tell me what's goin' on."

"She's usin' drugs. She's in this house, and there ain't no food here. There ain't nuthin' left in this house. She needs to come there to be with you and so does Sekyiwa."

Although the Shakurs lived in Marin City for only a few years, the time there was a turning point for each of them, sending their lives on different trajectories. Tupac summed it up for himself in an interview years later: “Leaving that school [BSA] affected me so much. I see [Marin City] as the point where I got off track.” “Off track” was losing the stability that the Baltimore School for the Arts offered. “Off track” meant having to enroll in a small-town high school where once again he didn’t know anybody, a school that emphasized academics and not the arts. “Off track” meant watching his mom, who was occasionally using drugs in Baltimore, plunge into the quicksand of crack cocaine addiction. “Off track” meant the place where his sister no longer had her mother to protect her, and consequently had a difficult time finding her own footing. The road of instability that was cracked and bumpy in Baltimore had nearly crumbled in Marin City.

Sekyiwa left first, heading back to New York before Afeni. “It was similar to a war,” Sekyiwa remembered later. “It was like in a troop when one is sick you separate yourself so you don’t affect everybody. You fix yourself to be back together.”

10

WORDS OF WISDOM

1989–1990

> This is for the masses, lower classes, ones you left out.
> Jobs were givin' better livin' but we were kept out.
> Made to feel inferior, but we're the superior.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

Without the distraction of school filling his days, Tupac was able to spend his time making plans for the future. He needed to find a way to make money, but he also sought to make his message heard through his music and his new role in the New Afrikan Panthers. He wanted a platform from which to launch his pronouncements and broadcast his concerns for the young Black men of America. A place from which to ask the world to listen.

His rap career became his life. He bought Donald Passman's book *All You Need to Know About the Music Business* and studied it, focusing on the chapter titled "How to Pick a Team." Following the book's prescribed steps, he assigned Leila the responsibility of being Strictly Dope's manager. "I'm gonna tell you what you're gonna do and how you're gonna sell me," he told her.

Leila tapped every Bay Area connection she had. One night, she, Tupac, and Tupac's friend Kendrick went to San Jose to see De La Soul, Afro-Rican, and Def Jef. Through Leila's local entertainment industry connections, they scored a set of VIP passes and spent the evening backstage among rap artists decked out in leather jackets, some sporting the logo "Delicious Vinyl." After the show, they were invited to the hotel suite where the artists were hanging out. Tupac was eager to rap for anyone who would listen, and as soon as he got the green light, he fired off a quick rendition of "Panther Power." Unfortunately, he got nothing but deadpan looks and shrugs from this crowd of accomplished rappers. No matter—the rejection only fueled his fire; one day he would prove them wrong, all those who didn't see his talent and what he felt he had to offer the world.

Leila also reached out to one of her business associates, Bay Area native and owner of TNT Management, Atron Gregory, a smart, no-nonsense but understated, low-profile professional. Atron was looking to add more talent to his already impressive client list, which included Grammy-nominated jazz pianist Rodney Franklin and three-time Grammy winner Stanley Clarke. Atron had also spent years as a tour manager for the already legendary rapper Eazy-E, member of N.W.A and founder of Ruthless Records. When Leila reached out, Atron was busy managing the worldwide launch of a new group called the Digital Underground, who were in the final stages of production of their debut album, *Sex Packets,* to be released by Tommy Boy Records.

Atron asked Leila for a video of the group first so that he could decide whether it would be worth a face-to-face meeting. Tupac and Ray Luv got to work. They set up a makeshift stage in Leila's backyard. "They did a whole show, a mini concert. They did songs they wrote together, and they each did a solo," Leila recalled. Tupac, naturally, would direct the video. He'd been training for this since his childhood days when he directed his cousins around the living room in their many family productions. Now he was also the cinematographer, calling the shots to make sure every angle was perfect and every moment had the right lighting. He was the emcee. He was the caterer, manning the barbecue for lunch, making sure everyone was fed. He even recited a monologue at the end of the video so that Atron would know that he wasn't just a rapper but also a talented thespian.

Atron liked what he saw, but he told Leila that before he made any decisions she needed to bring the group to meet with one of the artists he managed, Gregory Jacobs, aka "Shock G," one of the forces behind the Digital Underground. While Atron was the business mind of his management company, he often deferred to Shock on creative and production questions.

Tupac's first meeting with Shock took place at Starlight Sound, a recording studio in Richmond, California. The city of Richmond was just a twenty-minute drive, across a bridge, into a county that was far more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse than Marin, and one with a much higher crime rate. But the details of the city's history and its homicide rates or demographics weren't what was important at the moment.

Tupac could hardly contain himself. When he and Leila arrived at the studio, Shock G, a tall, slender, handsome brother with light brown skin and an afro, sat the mixing board. Tupac walked right up to him, confident, all business. "You ready? You want me to do it right now?"

Almost eight years older than Tupac, Shock was taken aback by the kid's assertiveness, but he went along with it. "Let's do it," he said, leading Tupac into the piano room, the place where Shock felt most at home. Shock himself was on the verge of stardom, well deserved. He was a chameleon, rapping both as himself and as his delightfully provocative alter ego, Humpty Hump, wearing a Groucho Marx–style glasses-and-fake-nose combo. An accomplished musician, Shock had respectfully earned the nickname "the Piano Man" from his friends.

Tupac started his audition with a song he'd written earlier that year called "The Case of the Misplaced Mic," which he thought would catch Shock's attention. Performing as if his life depended on it, Tupac unfolded a catchy rhythm and a carefully constructed rhyme, a story of a beloved microphone gone missing:

They finally did it. They stole the mic I grip
Now that it's gone, I'm feelin' tired and sick

Years later, Shock still remembered being impressed with Tupac's style and diction: "It was street. It was educated. It was articulate…like hip-hop fantasy type stuff, a spy looking for his mic."

Tupac passed the test. "Yeah, you're tight," Shock told him. "I'm gonna holla at Atron and tell him." A second meeting was scheduled with the entire Digital Underground. Atron wanted the rest of the group to weigh in because he knew if he signed Tupac, Shock and the other artists and producers in the group would likely be involved in putting together his demo. This time, Ray Luv and Strictly Dope's DJ, who went by Dize, would come with Tupac and Leila. But first, Atron offered Leila a cautionary note. "Just know that if Shock and the others like the group, that's fine," he told her. "But if they like Tupac only, then that's how it's gonna be."

And that's what happened. Money B, another member of the Digital Underground, recalled Tupac's presence even beyond the audition. "I thought Ray Luv and Tupac were equally talented as rappers," he recalled, "but once they stopped rapping, and Tupac continued to talk and his personality came out, he was just engaging and you can kind of see, okay, this is the guy."

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On August 2, 1989, just weeks after Tupac's eighteenth birthday, management contracts were drawn up and signed with Atron's company, TNT Management. Tupac was thrilled: Atron Gregory, former tour manager of Eazy-E and current manager of the Digital Underground, was now also *his* manager.

Tupac inserted his own stipulations into the contract, insisting that the deal be done under the group name Strictly Dope. He wanted to make sure that Ray Luv and Dize weren't left behind. But even though the contract was executed under the group name, Leila would continue to manage Ray Luv's career and Atron would take the reins of Tupac's. "It was easier that way," Atron recalled. "Ray was an exceptional talent. Tupac was an exceptional talent, but it just kind of worked out that way. I took Pac and she took Ray Luv."

In keeping with Tupac's lifelong roller coaster of ups and downs, his celebration was muted a few weeks later when he learned of the tragic death of one of his heroes. Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panther Party, had been murdered in cold blood on a street corner in West Oakland.

Through Afeni, Tupac had stayed in touch with several ex-Panthers over the years and through their stories had come to greatly admire Huey for his pioneering and courageous accomplishments in the 1970s. For Tupac, Huey's life embodied the hard-fought battle for equality from which many had turned away. He considered Huey a fair leader, a man who was willing to sacrifice his life for the poor, the drug addicted, the street hustlers, the voiceless, and those struggling to make ends meet. Huey had created an organization to challenge the system in place, one that had given shape and focus to Afeni's life and, through her, to Tupac's.

When Tupac heard the news of Huey's death, he felt compelled to write a poem entitled "Fallen Star" and bring it to Huey's family when he attended the memorial in Oakland.

They could never understand
What u set out 2 do
Instead they chose 2
Ridicule u
When u got weak
They loved the sight
Of your dimming
And flickering starlight
How could they understand what was so intricate
2 be loved by so many, so intimate

Huey had once said, "We've never advocated violence. Violence is inflicted on us. But we do believe in self-defense for ourselves and for Black people," a sentiment Afeni had impressed deeply upon Tupac, who saw himself reflected in the many men who were dying by gun violence around the country's crime-ridden inner cities. As the relentless chain of tragedies that had fallen upon the Shakur family over the years stirred inside Tupac's memory and heart, he started to believe that he, too, would eventually die an untimely death. Lumumba was dead. Zayd was dead.

Mutulu was in prison. Assata remained in exile. His mother, in her own struggle with addiction, flew close to the flame.

Tupac started to openly proclaim that his own life would end soon. He justified this prediction with statistics: Many Black men simply weren't making it past twenty-five years old. Some were sent to prison, while others became victims of the growing street violence. This fatalistic sentiment would persist for the rest of Tupac's life; before long, it would surface in his writing. In his poem "In the Event of My Demise" he made it plain:

In the event of my demise
When my heart can beat no more
I hope I die for a principle
or a belief that I had lived 4
I will die before my time
because I feel the shadow's depth
So much I wanted to accomplish
before I reach my death
I have come 2 grips with the possibility
and wiped the last tear from my eyes
I loved all who were positive
In the event of my demise

Despite the darkness of his predictions, Tupac never lost sight of the beauty and power of the contributions made by Black communities across the country. His heart longed to help those who had little reason to hope, to spark pride in those who felt trapped beneath the weight of systemic oppression. In one of his most iconic poems, "The Rose That Grew from Concrete," he sought to uplift the spirits of his broken brothers and sisters by letting them know that even from nothing, something beautiful could come:

Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack
in the concrete

Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk
without having feet
Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams
it learned 2 breathe fresh air
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else even cared!

—

With his management contract signed, it was time for Tupac to record his demo, a sample of three or four songs to introduce him to the record execs who held his future in their hands. He knew he needed to make a strong impression. Since Shock G was busy mixing Digital Underground's second single release, "The Humpty Dance," from their debut album, Tupac jumped into the studio with one of the group's producers, Jimi Dright, Jr., also known as "Chopmaster J."

"Panther Power" would come first. For months, he'd been reciting the lyrics to friends, strangers, teachers, and established artists in hotel suites. Now he was ready to officially put it down on tape. Chopmaster J set up the first recording session at a studio in Richmond. He remembered how hyped Tupac was: "He was a fireball of fucking energy." Energetic, though, did not mean without charm. Within hours, as Tupac continued to jump in and out of the sound booth to record his lyrics, he and the engineer's wife started to flirt with each other. The air quickly became awkward. "While we were in her husband's recording studio, she would be right behind her husband's back overtly flirting," recalled Chopmaster. "Touching, fondling, and playing with Tupac…I don't even think Pac knew she was married to the engineer, but eventually I had to take Pac aside and hip him to the situation. It was too weird trying to mix beats with Tupac and this woman giggling in the dark corner."

Chopmaster knew he had to find another studio. "Tupac had grown to be like my little brother," he wrote. "He was obnoxious but infectious all at the same time. I could see that it stemmed from his passions more than anything else." They ended up at the home of Digital Underground's road manager, Neil "Sleuth" Johnson. Sleuth lived with his mother near Thirty-Ninth and Market Street in West Oakland, and since she was rarely home, he had converted a portion of the living space into a home studio. The place had recently become Digital Underground's creative den—perfect timing for Tupac.

Just as in every city where he'd lived before, Tupac found himself with a new circle of friends. Only this time it was different. This new crew was already making a name, globe-trotting, showcasing their talent to amphitheater-sized crowds. And because Sleuth's apartment also served as Digital Underground's temporary headquarters, Tupac was able to see all that went into the launch of the group's album. He had a front-row seat as Sleuth planned tour logistics and discussed merchandise sales. He watched Digital Underground member Money-B and the rest of the crew give press interviews, and he listened in to Shock's creative conversations with the record label. Best of all, he no longer had to go "up top" or down to the Front to hustle his rhymes for money. The feedback and constructive criticism he had long been thirsting for were right there in front of him, coming from a crew who had already made it.

Another benefit for Tupac of recording in a home studio environment was spontaneous meetings with new friends who came by to hang out. One evening, while he was recording at Sleuth's, Money-B stopped by with a female friend he had known since high school. When they walked in, Tupac told them he'd just written a new song for his demo and wanted their opinion. Money recalls his girl's reaction the moment Tupac started performing. "The girl just started gazin' at Tupac. And I was lookin' at him and lookin' at her look at him and I was like, 'Maybe there is something special about this dude.' I'd never seen someone stare at someone like that who they never met or who wasn't famous. She was mesmerized."

Chopmaster J brought in another Digital Underground producer, DJ Fuze, and within weeks they'd finished recording another three songs in consideration for Tupac's demo.

During another studio session with Ray Luv, Tupac noticed a balled-up piece of paper in the trash can. He opened it up and discovered a song Ray Luv had started to write called “Trapped.”

“I wrote the opening line to a song about how I felt in this environment,” remembered Ray. “How I felt in my skin…being a dark-skinned Black man in a county that is predominantly white and wealthy, especially in Santa Rosa, which is a retired policemen’s community. People like me and Pac, by definition, were considered ‘the other,’ and my interactions with police at the time were always them telling me, ‘Get on your knees!’ and ‘Pull everything out of your pockets!’ That’s how they treated us—*every single day*…but I was never really comfortable with being as intimate and open as Pac was.”

Tupac looked at the paper and said to Ray, “Yo, this is dope…let me do something with this.” Ray said yes. Right away Tupac got out his notebook and started writing.

Tupac wrote a song about the hopelessness that Black men feel being trapped in their own communities because of police harassment. The track would eventually become the first single of his debut album:

They got me trapped
Can barely walk the city streets without a cop harassing me
Searching me then asking my identity

With every session Tupac’s confidence grew. His demo was progressing, and his new friends could see his immense talent on display in the studio. But even with a record deal seemingly coming closer, Tupac was still thinking about his people. The call of activism remained strong. From Atlanta, Chokwe and Watani continued to encourage Tupac’s future as the leader of the New Afrikan Panthers, so much that Tupac told Chopmaster J that he was considering moving to Atlanta. Chop quickly sounded the alarm: “At that point I really stressed to [Atron] that we better take Tupac on the road with us or we might lose him.”

The warning didn't come soon enough. Tupac flew to Georgia to meet with Watani and others in November 1989. He attended a NAPO meeting, where politically minded Black youth convened and nominated him to lead the organization as chairman. Representatives from California, Atlanta, New York, and Mississippi voted.

Watani set up a string of press events to get the word out about the organization and Tupac's new role. In an interview with WRFG Atlanta's *Round Midnight with Bomani Bakari,* Tupac explained his role as chairman and the plans that he and the organization had developed. "It is my duty to basically be one of many spokespersons and to implement some of the principles of the program into everyday life and to try to get what we're doing and what we're trying to do across this country, across the United States of America." In another interview, he made the next steps sound even more concrete. "We're starting the Black Panthers again in Marin City. First teaching pride and then teaching education and then we'll see where it goes from there."

The host asked Tupac about the widely publicized murder of Yusuf Hawkins, the young Black teenager killed by a mob of young Italian men in Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood: "[When this happened] I was in California. That's where I live at now. The way that our society is working now, only negative images of the Black community are portrayed worldwide…. This happens, and it's been happening and it's happened before and it's gonna happen again, unless brothas and sisters actually stop and realize that everything is not okay in America. It's time that we start worrying and get angry. Not angry and pick up a gun, but angry and start opening our minds. Stop sleeping. That's really what the Panthers are all about, is providing an alternative, a movement for you to hop into."

The radio host asked Tupac if it was necessary to link up with the youth in Palestine, Nicaragua, and South America so that the efforts could be international. Tupac's response was unequivocal: "I think it's one hundred percent necessary, but we have to unite as one here before we can even ponder the possibility of going abroad and helping brothas abroad. Right now we can't even unite here. You have to understand, the oppressor has brainwashed us for hundreds of years and made us think that we came from an inferior, puny race, and now he has us thinking that everything is okay and we're living in *A Different World* and *The Cosby Show* and that everything is happy-go-lucky and everybody's fine. Everybody's getting paid in full. But we all know that situations like Yusuf Hawkins happens and will happen. So everything is not okay."

Tupac's poem "Untitled," written during this time, captures the emotional suffocation he felt from the compounding pressures of oppression and poverty, the cost of the struggle for young Black men not simply to *survive* in America in the 1990s, but to feel some sense of honor and respect from the dominating culture.

Please wake me when I'm free
I cannot bear captivity
Where my culture I'm told holds no significance
I'll wither and die in ignorance
But my inner eye can C a race
who reigned as Kings in another place
The green of trees were Rich and full
And every man spoke Beautiful
Men and women together as equals
War was gone because all was peaceful
But now like a nightmare I wake 2 C
That I live like a prisoner of poverty
Please wake me when I'm free
I cannot bear captivity
4 I would rather be stricken blind
Than 2 live without expression of mind

Whether through his poetry or his lyrics, Tupac created art with the intention of channeling the raw emotions that millions of Black Americans were feeling. These sentiments were at the heart of both "Panther Power" and "Trapped." When he returned to California, he cut another song for his demo, one he'd written years before that reprised and extended these themes, a song called "Words of Wisdom." In the song's intro, he flipped the connotation of the word "nigger" and urged his listeners to fight back and start making goals. He incorporated themes that had been part of his upbringing but also some that were integrated into the New Afrikan Panthers mission as well:

When I say niggas it is not the nigga we are grown to fear
It is not the nigga we say as if it has no meaning
But to me it means Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished

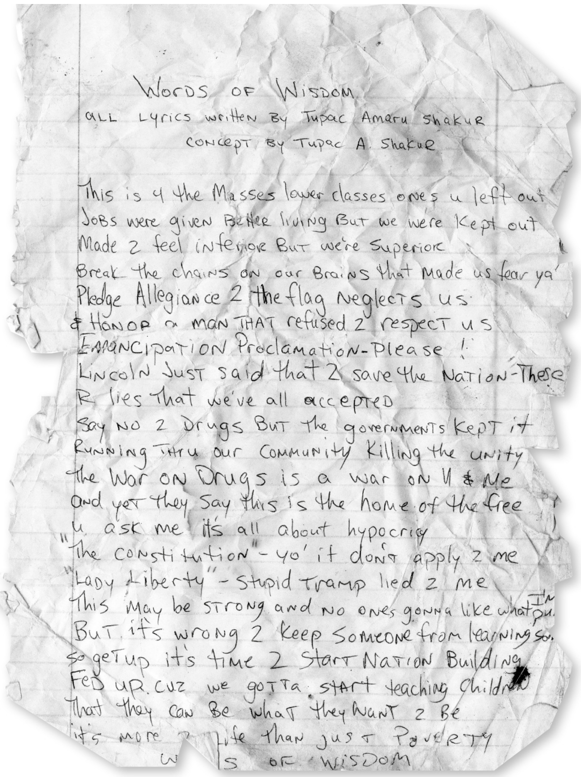
The song itself addressed what Tupac saw as contradictions in American society. He wove in commentary on Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the Statue of Liberty, and the American flag. Describing these lyrics years later, he noted that "that same flag flew over us while they beat us and sold us and did all kind of injustices, and the police that carried that flag used to hold people down with the flag held high."

In "Words of Wisdom" he aimed his message at those who were left behind, the disenfranchised "masses, the lower classes, ones you left out."

With enough songs completed to shop the demo, Atron reached out to his record-industry contacts, starting with labels where he had already done deals. He started with Tommy Boy Records. The label's roster was expanding rapidly—they had just released De La Soul's landmark *3 Feet High and Rising* in March of that year, and Queen Latifah's debut, *All Hail the Queen*, was set to drop in November. Since Atron had just negotiated and closed a deal for Digital Underground with Tommy Boy the year before, and since the group had been enjoying wild amounts of success since their signing, he hoped it would be his first and only stop.

As Atron worked his contacts, Tupac waited.

But he wasn't the only one invested in his future responsibilities with the New Afrikan Panthers. When Chokwe got word that Tupac's manager was actively shopping his music, he called Leila right away to deliver a forceful message: *He* would be the one who determined the priorities of his new youth chairman. “He’s a son of the revolution,” he told Leila. “You have him recording now. You’re getting him this deal. But you have to understand what this goal is. And I’m directing what is happening now.”



Words of Wisdom
all lyrics written By Tupac Amaru Shakur
concept By Tupac A. Shakur

This is 4 the Masses lower classes ones u left out
Jobs were given Better living But we were Kept out
Made 2 feel inferior But we're Superior
Break the chains on our Brains that made us fear ya'
Pledge Allegiance 2 the flag Neglects us
& Honor a man THAT refused 2 respect us
Emancipation Proclamation-Please!
Lincoln Just said that 2 save the Nation-These
R lies that we've all accepted
Say no 2 Drugs But the governments Kept it
Running thru our Community Killing the unity
the War on Drugs is a war on U & Me
and yet they Say this is the home of the free
u ask me it's all about hypocrisy
"The Constitution"-yo' it don't apply 2 me
"Lady Liberty"-stupid tramp lied 2 me
This may be strong and no ones gonna like what I'm pu
But it's wrong 2 keep someone from learning so
so get up it's time 2 Start Nation Building
Fed up cuz we gotta start teaching children
That they can Be what they want 2 Be
it's more 2 life than just Poverty
W s of Wisdom

“Words of Wisdom,” circa 1989

Click here to view as text

Now Leila was the one to sound the alarm. When she called Atron to let him know that Tupac’s focus was being redirected, he called Shock G right away. Shock was making preparations to continue the domestic leg of the Digital Underground tour before the group headed to Japan.

“Can you do something with Tupac?” Atron asked.

Shock was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Can you take him on the tour with you?”

“What? We’re full.”

“Well, if we don’t do something, we’re gonna lose him.”

“Maybe I can replace one of the roadies?” Shock offered.

That would have to do. But first Shock made sure to sit Tupac down and explain a roadie's responsibilities. He cautioned him that they included menial tasks such as carrying bags for the artists. He told Tupac that he didn't want to humiliate him by asking or expecting him to do this on tour—Shock understood that Tupac, too, was an artist, not a bag handler. Tupac was quick to say he didn't care. "I'll do anything. I'm goin' crazy here." So Shock pulled Money-B's brother off the tour and gave Tupac his spot. The way Shock figured it, Money's brother wasn't a rapper, but Tupac was. If it came to it, Tupac could serve as a backup dancer and even rap in a pinch. But mostly it was about offering him the promise of something more.

"Tupac was not going to wait for anybody," recalled Atron. "He was frustrated because he wanted to get out there and show his talents and do what everyone else was doing. If not, he was gonna leave and go somewhere else."

11

FAME

1990–1992

> I owe everything to the hood.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

The *Big Daddy Kane: Chocolate City* tour was scheduled to roll through more than twenty cities in two months. Kane, with his catchy rhymes and sharp fashion, had become a breakout star with his albums *Long Live the Kane* and *It's a Big Daddy Thing*. Along with Digital Underground, his supporting acts on the tour included Queen Latifah, who had just scored her debut hit single, "Ladies First"; rapper MC Lyte; and 3rd Bass. Eric B. & Rakim and De La Soul would also join the lineup in cities along the way, as would an up-and-coming artist named Jay-Z.

As Shock and crew took off on a cross-country flight to Georgia, where they'd start the bus leg of the tour, a new chapter of Tupac's journey began. He was embarking on a life onstage, a goal he'd dreamed of since the curtain opened at his first performance in *A Raisin in the Sun,* only five years earlier. But when the group arrived at the first venue, in Augusta, it became apparent that Tupac would not be humbled by the opportunity. There would be no hanging back to watch, no playing it cool to get the lay of the land. He was a man on a mission, outspoken, in your face, righting wrongs wherever he saw them—even if it meant mixing it up with the tour's one and only sound man.

During Digital Underground's set, static and feedback interrupted the volume levels of the microphones. According to Tupac, it ruined their performance. By the time the set ended, he was fuming. As the group walked backstage, Tupac ran over to the sound man and yelled, "You fucked up our sound! And you did that shit on purpose!"

“Pac tried to knock his head off,” Money-B remembered. “He swung at him. I mean, the sound man did actually do something that was way out of line, and everybody really did wanna kick his ass, but Pac was ready to jump on him.” When Money told him to calm down, Tupac grew even more infuriated.

But Tupac was also giving others, including Atron and Shock G, reasons to tell him to calm down. He was always the first to react, ready to challenge any security guard or police officer. They spent many evenings trying to control Tupac’s energy and unpredictability. “I’ve had three ankle injuries,” Atron said. “One was grabbing Tupac when he ran off the stage into the audience after the show. I don’t know if I was telling him to calm down or just not run into the audience without his shirt on after the show….But you’re not supposed to do that. The next artist is coming onstage and all the attention is supposed to go to them, so I grabbed him and stumbled and hurt my ankle.” By the end of the tour, telling Tupac to calm down had become a running joke.

During daily meetings on the tour bus, Tupac was always perched and ready to inject a comment, amend the agenda, or just add his two cents. And after Tupac proved he could carry bags and fulfill his roadie tasks, Shock G asked him to come onstage with the rest of the group to perform as one of the backup dancers.

The Digital Underground set was not your average hip-hop show. The group rapped and they danced, but it was the props and theatrical antics that made them one of the most memorable musical acts of the ’90s. Shock G was the quintessential front man, seamlessly moving in and out of character as his alter ego, Humpty Hump, and hyping up the crowd with water guns and blow-up sex dolls until the audience was in a frenzy. Tupac dove in, headfirst, ready to be part of it all.

The moment he stepped onto the stage as a backup dancer, his confidence and charm caught the attention of the female fans in the audience. “Pac was immediately hot with the ladies from city one,” Shock recalled. “That’s when we really knew he was a star. We were already working on his albums. We believed in him. We knew he could rhyme. But we knew he was a star by how the girls reacted." Even before the first show, during soundcheck, Tupac ended up in the back of the bus with a girl he'd just met that day. Money-B was astounded. "I was thinkin', How's this dude gonna come here the very first day and get chicks before me? She sat on the back of the bus with him for a while and they were all lovey-dovey and later that night after the show he did her on the bus [before everyone got on]."

She and Tupac created a potentially explosive situation when the bus driver noticed a strange man chasing the bus as it pulled away from the arena. The driver came to a stop and opened up the doors. "Is my girl on there?" the man demanded, evidently a disgruntled boyfriend. A sea of no's answered loudly from the bus. The bus driver shut the door, leaving the man standing there while she and Tupac hid in the back.

When Shock noticed the adoring response Tupac received from female fans during the show, he decided to give him a shot on the microphone. At first, Tupac freestyled, but that posed a problem; Tupac couldn't contain himself to just one verse here or there. He instantly started to take over other members' verses by rapping it with them, or for them. Sometimes, when one of the singers was hitting a chorus and Tupac didn't like the way it sounded, he would even try to sing over it to keep the audience focused on him. "He would just take the whole show in his hands," Shock recalled. "I kept feelin' like Frank in *Scarface,* and he was Tony Montana. He was just tryin' to flip the whole script."

Shock asked him to chill. Tupac ignored him. Shock warned him again. But Tupac didn't care whose turn it was. He didn't care if he was hired initially just as a roadie. Every time Shock put the mic in his hand, Tupac was on a mission.

After a few warnings, and another night of Tupac stepping on someone else's verse, Shock had had enough. He fired Tupac. "You're not a singer, Pac," he explained.

"But he wasn't singing that shit right," Tupac protested.

"You wouldn't know. You're not a singer."

"But we were losin' the crowd. They weren't likin' that shit. I had to do somethin' to get everyone back into it."

"How would you like it if someone sang over your parts?" Shock asked.

Tupac cut to the chase. "Fuck that! What? You sending me home?"

"Yeah, I'm sending you home," Shock fired back. Then he yelled loudly to everyone who could hear, "Fuck that! Yeah, Pac's off the tour!"

But he never went. Instead of accepting that he was fired and leaving that night, Tupac ended up in the lobby congregating with the crew. Shock sat at the piano, with everyone gathered around, freestyling and singing, unwinding from a long day. And there was Tupac rollin' right along like nothing happened. Like he hadn't been fired. Like he wasn't supposed to have found his own way home and be halfway there by now. He couldn't help himself. He loved his new life and he especially loved the after-show freestylin' sessions. MC Serch from 3rd Bass was always there, and sometimes Queen Latifah. "Anytime he had a chance to speak out, and that would be in those freestyle sessions, he did. Tupac would wanna go all night," recalls Money-B.

And so it went, Shock kicking Tupac off the tour, Tupac refusing to go. Shock laughed about it years later. "I used to send Pac home a lot. We'd curse each other out, but two hours later we'd get over it." Looking back, he summed up his relationship up with Tupac by saying, "It was one long argument."

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As Digital Underground's "Humpty Dance" hit number 1 on *Billboard*'s rap singles chart, the group's stock increased and opportunities abounded. One of these opportunities was an invitation to go back on the road, this time with some of Tupac's biggest hip-hop heroes—the politically charged rap group Public Enemy, led by Flavor Flav and Chuck D. Just two years before, Tupac had skipped school and rushed to meet Flavor Flav at the local radio station, just hoping to get a photo; now he was part of a lineup that would travel across the country with Public Enemy as they promoted their new album *Fear of a Black Planet.* Heavy D, Ice Cube, and Queen Latifah would also join parts of the tour.

The buses for the *Fear of a Black Planet* tour offered artists a more luxurious experience—bigger beds and kitchen areas and better TVs—than those for Big Daddy Kane's tour, but what mattered most to Tupac was who was on the bus. Even though it was expected that each group and their entourage remain on their assigned bus during their travels, Tupac roamed freely, often forming friendships with girls who were part of the adjoining entourages.

One of them was twenty-five-year-old Rosie Perez, a dancer in Heavy D's act, and at the beginning of a career that would, like Tupac's, take her far in Hollywood. Enamored and curious, she remembered the first time she saw Tupac. Standing with Heavy D when Tupac took the stage, she was taken by his presence. "That muthafucka is a star!" she yelled out. "And everyone just started to look at him, because I said it, I said it really loud. We were in the wings. And I remember walking out of the wings of the stage down into the front, where security is, so I could watch him. I don't know why I did that; he just compelled me to do so. That was just his greatness."

Once the two got acquainted they realized they shared similar backgrounds. After that, they often found themselves sitting next to each other as the buses rolled through the countryside. At one stop on the tour, Tupac asked if he could recite a poem for her. When he was done, Rosie said, "Yo, that's good. You're going to write a book of poetry."

Tupac responded, "I'm going to be bigger than a book."

Tupac also found a friend in Yolanda Whitaker, an eighteen-year-old South Central Los Angeles native who rapped as "Yo-Yo" and had appeared on Ice Cube's hit song "It's a Man's World." When Cube periodically joined the tour, Yo-Yo performed the song live with him. After those shows, Tupac and Yo-Yo often took long walks together, their conversations weaving in and out of their life goals and Hollywood dreams. Tupac would chain-smoke cigarettes as they walked. "Why do you always smoke so much?" Yo-Yo would ask every time he lit up.

“Stress,” Tupac responded. He told Yo-Yo that he was ready for his career to take off and that he wanted to be center stage. That he’d grown up poor and needed to make some money. Even though Tupac was finally receiving a weekly paycheck and per diem, a majority of his earnings were going back to Atron to recoup the advance he received when he signed to TNT.

Since the bond between Yo-Yo and Tupac was based on their mutual love for art, poetry, and writing rhymes specifically, their conversations often turned into rap sessions. “He used to always be hungry,” Yo-Yo recalled. “He would bang on the table and rap anywhere we went.” And she remembers specifically he would talk about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., turning the other cheek. She was attracted to his militancy and his willingness to stand up against inequities and unfairness. “What made me love him so much is because he really cared for the community,” Yo-Yo recalled. Their conversations sometimes lasted until the sun came up.

Tupac soon began writing Yo-Yo letters and poetry. During their time together on tour, the two crossed the friendship line. “When we kissed, it was magical,” she remembered.

Tupac also befriended one of Queen Latifah’s roadies, a New Jersey native named Anthony “Treach” Criss, who would eventually earn global fame with his group Naughty by Nature. Both young men were determined to rap their way to stardom. “We saw a whole new life together,” Treach remembered, “from two different hoods, but, like, the same type of homies with the same mindset, looking for the same type of thing.”

Despite the excitement of being on another nationwide tour, there were still moments when Tupac’s troubled family life weighed heavy on his heart. Periodic calls to New York to talk to Sekyiwa and check in on how Afeni was holding up in Marin City left him uncertain. He knew his mother had a long road ahead of her in beating her drug addiction, but he held on to his hope, believing that she was strong enough to find a path to recovery. Sometimes during these sad and discouraging moments, he would sit alone in his hotel room listening to Mariah Carey’s “Vision of Love”:

Felt so alone
Suffered from alienation
Carried the weight on my own

"You always knew when Pac was sad," Shock recalled, " 'cause if you walked by his hotel room and heard that playing, you knew."

Money-B, too, learned quickly how to navigate Tupac's moods. The two often roomed together while on tour and grew closer when they discovered they were both children of Black Panthers. Money had been raised in Oakland and was a product of the Panther-run Oakland Community School. Handed his high school diploma by Huey P. Newton, Money knew exactly what it felt like to be a "Panther cub." Tupac was thrilled to finally find a friend who didn't think he was speaking a foreign language when he talked about COINTELPRO or Fred Hampton, or about his godfather Geronimo Pratt's wrongful conviction or the plight of the Panther 21. Money remembered their conversations often spun from the Panthers and their childhoods to Tupac's love for and deep connection to his mother. "Tupac would always say, 'Man, you gotta meet my mom, she's the shit!' Whether it was talking about how she was on crack, or whether he was telling me about all the things she taught him and that half the shit that he knew was from her, we'd get into a conversation about something…anything, and it'd always lead back to some kind of story about his mom."

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Even with the feelings of success on the horizon, Tupac was still a live wire when it came to confrontations with the police. One night they had a hard time getting into a club and the police got involved. Shock was ready to leave, but Tupac jumped into the fray. Shock recounted, "We all decided we're gonna walk. Fuck it, we'll just go to the next club, but because someone raised their voice at Queen Latifah, Pac went off on the police officers."

Staring the officer in the eye, he asked loudly, “Do you know who you’re talking to? That’s Queen Latifah. Fuck that! Nobody can talk to Queen Latifah like that!” A potentially explosive situation was only defused by a last-minute intervention by Shock, who came upon the scene, practically picked up an irate Tupac, and set him aside to try to get him to calm down.

But Tupac couldn’t calm down. If there was an officer of any sort nearby, he was on alert, ready to guard against injustice. From Afeni’s teachings that the police were not to be trusted, and all he had seen in Baltimore and Marin City, Tupac’s reaction became reflexive, the intensity never easing.

When Digital Underground performed at venues in the Bible Belt states, their stage show had to be revised because local laws forbade “crude” acts—a designation that certainly included the humping and dancing with blow-up dolls that had become one of the group’s performance signatures. Instead of leaving out the props, though, the band devised a plan. They would frolic with the dolls as usual, but as soon as the show ended, instead of going backstage where the officers would be waiting, they would jump off the five-foot stage and land in the audience. From there, they could blend in with the crowd, and the police officers who lined the stage wouldn’t be able to find them.

One night, as soon as the show ended, Shock jumped into the audience first, followed by Tupac and Money. While Shock and Money mixed calmly with the fans, ensuring that no attention was brought to them, Tupac sprinted through the audience toward the parking lot. When Money finally made his way outside, he spotted Tupac darting around and hiding behind cars. “He was ducking behind cars like he was on *Mission: Impossible* or something,” Money-B recalled with amusement. In the end, this paranoid, over-the-top behavior made him an obvious suspect to the cops who had rushed outside, leading to his eventual arrest and a night in jail for public misconduct.

As much as Tupac detested security guards and police officers, he was not above doing some policing himself, taking matters into his own hands if those he cared for were wronged. In Oklahoma City, news traveled backstage that someone had entered Public Enemy's dressing room and stolen Chuck D's signature black leather jacket. Tupac was infuriated, another holdover response from Afeni's lessons about lying and stealing. He combed the place looking for the culprit. "I think I know who did it. I'm gonna find out who did it," Tupac promised Chuck D.

Hours later, while everyone gathered in the hotel lobby to board the bus, a man suddenly barreled through the sliding-glass doors. Tupac was in hot pursuit, catching up quickly enough to land a few punches before the man jumped behind the reception desk. No one quite understood what was happening. Tupac scrambled to get to the man behind the desk, but someone on the tour restrained him. In that moment, the thief was able to jump back over the desk and escape.

"Why you holdin' me, man?!" Tupac yelled. "I found the guy! That's the guy that stole Chuck D's jacket. Let me go!" By then it was too late. Although it seemed that Tupac was the only one who truly cared about the petty theft, he still earned respect for his efforts. "He created his own legend within that first tour," Money-B remembered, "where every group and band that was with us went away wondering what was going to happen, what we were going to do with him. But they knew they were gonna see him again."

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The Public Enemy tour propelled Tupac closer to the goals he had set for himself with regard to his rap career, but it also planted the seeds for his film aspirations. In the middle of the tour, Digital Underground was invited to open up for Biz Markie at the Palace in Hollywood, California. Actor Dan Aykroyd was in the crowd; he headed backstage after the show to meet the group, and made them an offer they couldn't refuse: He asked them to make a cameo appearance in his next movie, *Nothing But Trouble,* and record a couple of songs for the film's soundtrack. Soon the group was making plans to shoot the film cameo in Los Angeles. Not only would Tupac be on a Hollywood movie set for the first time, but he was going to be filming a scene with A-list actors: Dan Aykroyd, Demi Moore, Chevy Chase, and John Candy.

Shock may have felt that his relationship with Tupac was "one long argument," but he couldn't deny his talent, or that the new guy was on his way to great things. Ultimately, he gave Tupac a huge break: He asked him to write and record a verse on one of the songs Digital Underground would record for the film's soundtrack. Tupac was thrilled. If the song was a hit, it would be his formal introduction to the wider audience he hoped to reach. And more important, it might help increase his chances of securing a record deal.

The tune Shock had in mind was called "Same Song," a classic Digital Underground party jam with funky verses from Shock (Humpty Hump) and Money-B. Tupac rapped his verse last, picking up an introductory hook from Shock: "2Pac, go 'head and rock this." And true to form, he was simply himself. Where the other rappers focused mostly on party flexes, Tupac's verse reads almost like a memoir, telling listeners about how his life had changed and, despite that, how committed he was to keeping it real.

When it came time to film the music video, the wardrobe department brought in costumes for the group that played into the song's hook: "All around the world same song." "We had all these different outfits representing 'all the same song,' 'all around the world,' and different nationalities," Shock remembered. "And I told Money he had to be the Hasidic Jew, and said Pac, you gonna be the African."

They presented Tupac with a shiny gold African gown, a brown sash, and an intricate beaded African necklace with a matching gold kufi. The accessory was a large, elaborate brown wooden African walking stick. Tupac stared skeptically at the wardrobe selected for him. "Why I gotta be the African?" he asked half-joking, but also half-serious.

But when Tupac realized that, in the video, they would hoist him up and carry him like royalty in a palanquin, his skepticism about the African garb turned to excitement. "But he did it and he did it well. And he went down in history as an African king," Shock G remembered. And within weeks, he was on television screens around the world, kicking his “Same Song” verse on MTV.

The opportunity Shock G gave Tupac to record eight bars on “Same Song” for Digital Underground was monumental. Not only would radio listeners hear Tupac’s voice for the first time, but the movie cameo would earn him a coveted Screen Actors Guild membership, a process that typically takes an aspiring actor years to attain. And of course, the video of the song, shot with the costumes they’d selected and made interspersed with footage from the movie, marked his first appearance in a music video.

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Tupac later spoke about his times on tour with Digital Underground as being some of the best of his life. Since he had signed with Atron’s TNT Management a year before, he had appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* with Shock G and Money-B, traveled throughout the country and took his first trip abroad (to Japan), and appeared in a major motion picture. But despite the flurry of success, he could never put aside all that his mother was struggling with back in Marin City. He had not yet come to terms with his hero falling, and while he was away he had called her less and less often. Eventually, the two of them were barely speaking. But Afeni never blamed Tupac for being upset with her. She understood that it would be a heavy burden on any child to know that their mother was on drugs.

Still, Tupac planned to check in with her the moment he returned from the tour. When he reached her, he sensed time was running out. Afeni had been moving back and forth between her friend Gwen’s apartment in Marin City and that of a man she’d met who lived four hours north in Lake Tahoe. But she was still slipping, and she and Tupac both knew she couldn’t stay in Marin City any longer. It was time for her to return to New York to be with her sister. “I was dying and I knew that I was dying because my spirit was not there at all,” Afeni would write of this time in her memoir. “I would go to bed at night and really not care whether or not I woke up. Something inside of me was pushing me to get home, get to New York and my family.”

Again, Tupac called his aunt Jean, this time to finalize plans for Afeni's departure and subsequent arrival in New York. Perhaps to try to massage a hard situation, Tupac said he would be coming soon, too. "Tupac tells this lie," Jean recalled. "He says, 'I'm going to send her first and then I'm going to follow.' That's the lie…To make it easy. He knew telling me that, I'm going for it because he was my darling dear. But I knew he wasn't coming. Why would he? Everything was just taking off. He just wanted his mother to be somewhere safe so he could concentrate on his career."

It was a chilly day in December when they finally arranged for Afeni to leave California.

On the day Afeni was scheduled to leave, Tupac and Ray Luv rode with Mike Cooley to the bus terminal at Fourth and Heatherton in San Rafael. Cooley recalls, "Glo [Jean] told us if we can get her out to New York, she would take care of her. I bought her a Greyhound bus ticket and a box of KFC chicken and put some money in her pocket. And I told her, 'You don't have to worry about your son. As long as I got a roof over my head and some money, he'll be straight.' "

Tupac was saddened that his mother had fallen to the undertow of addiction and needed to leave California. But even though this would be the first time in Tupac's life that he and his mother would be living across the country from each other, he was comforted by the fact he was sending her back to the safe and secure home of her sister. Tupac reached into his pocket and gave her a wad of cash. The two exchanged a quiet goodbye as Afeni boarded the bus.

"My family talked me home," Afeni recalled of the days-long bus journey across the country. "Every stop I called them crying, cold, hungry, alone. And they talked me home—my daughter, my nephew Katari, the youngest one, he gave me strength over that phone. He told me he loved me, and he missed me and he wanted me home."

Days later, when the bus finally reached the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York, Jean arrived at the station to find Afeni sitting on the floor with her suitcase next to her. When Afeni spotted her sister, a wave of relief washed over her. "When I saw my family come down the steps, it was the first time I felt human again," she said. "I didn't know who I was anymore, or even who I used to be. I really didn't. So when I saw them it was like a signal that I belonged. I really did belong someplace, you know. And they loved me gently, back to health."

12

NOTHING BUT TROUBLE

1991

Girls who used to frown, say I'm down, when I come around
Gas me and when they pass me, they used to dis me, harass me,
but now they ask me if they can kiss me.

—TUPAC SHAKUR

"Same Song" was released on January 6, 1991, just weeks after Afeni left California. As Tupac, Ray Luv, and Leila approached the Richmond–San Rafael Bridge that week, with the dial tuned to KMEL, they were thrilled to hear Tupac's voice coming at them through the car speakers. "We were so excited!" Leila recalled, "And I'm asking everyone to get your money out, I need two dollars to get over the bridge. And everyone searched their pockets and no one had any money and I ended up having to write a check to get over the bridge."

Tupac noted the irony: "We should all remember it will be the last time that I can't pay two dollars to get over a bridge."

It was also one of the last times he'd have to stay with Leila or Mike Cooley. With a little assistance from Mike Cooley and Man-Man, who had become two of his closest friends and confidants, combined with his paychecks from a quick overseas Japan tour and a check from the *Nothing But Trouble* film and soundtrack, Tupac earned enough money to rent his own apartment, a one-bedroom on MacArthur Boulevard in Oakland, walking distance from Lake Merritt. Digital Underground member Schmoovy-Schmoov was the property manager for the complex, which helped move the application process along. "We were all like family to him," Shock recalled. "We used to have to work the applications. We would all pitch in and borrow credit cards and co-sign."

Tupac prepared to finally take the California driver's license test and get his first car. Man-Man was just as ready for Tupac to have his own ride. "I was tired of driving him around all the time dropping him off at all his females' houses. I said, 'Man, I can't be doing this, dude. We gotta get you a car. I gotta teach you how to drive.' " Man-Man had a dealership license for the wholesale market and had recently acquired a beat-up Toyota Celica hatchback. "I might have paid about seven hundred dollars for it. I told him, 'Man, just take this.' "

The moment Tupac's career started to take off, he began thinking about how he could pass along his success by cultivating the early careers of other aspiring artists. He wanted to line up a roster of talented youth and try to help them channel their rebelliousness into music instead of taking it to the streets. With this in mind, he launched a program called the Underground Railroad. "All the stuff I say in my rhymes I say because of how I grew up. So to handle that, instead of going to a psychiatrist, I got a kids group that deals with the problems a younger generation is going through," Tupac explained to hip-hop journalist Davey D. "The concept behind this is the same concept behind Harriet Tubman, to get my brothers who might be into drug dealing or whatever it is that's illegal or who are disenfranchised by today's society, I want to get them back into society by turning them on to music….Right now we're twenty strong. The people that are in the UR are coming from all over—Baltimore, Marin City, Oakland, New York, Richmond, all over."

Around this time, Tupac reunited with his stepbrother, Maurice Shakur, aka Mopreme, Mutulu's son. It had been years since they'd seen each other, since the days of celebrating Kwanzaa as a family when they lived in New York. Mopreme, four years older than Tupac, had broken into the music business before Tupac did, as a featured artist on Tony! Toni! Toné!'s 1990 smash hit "Feels Good," which had skyrocketed to the number 9 position on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.

Tupac was always as inclusive as possible when it came to friends and family. That year Katari, Malcolm Greenidge, and Yafeu "Yaki" Fula flew across the country and spent their summer vacation in Oakland, where

Tupac immersed them in the artist life, encouraging them to start writing and get in the studio. Though Katari and Malcolm were still in high school and Yaki was only fourteen, Tupac knew the more time they spent with him on the West Coast, the readier they'd be to start making albums when they graduated from high school. Around the same time, Tupac also mentored a rapper named Mystah and a group of five young aspiring rap artists from Oakland, ranging in age from eleven to thirteen, whom he named the Kidz. He invested what little money he had left to buy them studio time.

Between the Kidz, Mystah, and recording more demo songs for himself, Tupac practically lived at various studios around Richmond, particularly Starlight Sound. While the Kidz, whose name he changed to the Havenotz, were in school during the day, Tupac worked on his own music. When school let out, the Havenotz came straight to the studio to record their songs. Tupac promised them weekly trips to Toys "R" Us if they maintained their grades, showed up on time to the studio, and stayed out of trouble. On one of these trips, the boys decided to buy Super Soaker water guns. Back at the apartment, Tupac joined in the water games, outfitting the children in Glad plastic bags to keep them dry before assuming his *Scarface* character and climbing up to his apartment roof with his Super Soaker, picking off the kids one by one.

But as he continued to cultivate the careers of artists like the Havenotz, news from Tupac's manager, Atron, proved there would be bumps on his own road to fame and success. One night while Tupac was recording at Starlight Sound, Atron pulled him aside.

"Can we step outside and take a quick walk?" he asked. Atron gave it to him straight: "I just wanted you to know that I'm having a hard time getting you a deal." He had started the process of shopping Tupac's demo to every record label with which he had a relationship. At first, Atron thought Tommy Boy Records would sign him, since Laura Hines, the label's publicist, had spent time on the road with Tupac and Digital Underground in Japan. After seeing Tupac's natural ability to draw a crowd from a stage, Hines told Atron she was impressed and would try to convince her executives to sign him. But ultimately, they said no. In addition to Tommy Boy, Elektra and Def Jam also passed.

Tupac took in the bad news, but his desire, determination, and will to get what he wanted kept him focused on the future during that moment. "*All* I want in my life is to have a record out and be in a movie. That's all I want." And then he added, "And if I can't do that, I'm going to be president of the New Afrikan Panthers."

Weeks later, Digital Underground's road manager, Sleuth, received a call from Cara Lewis, the group's booking agent at William Morris. A film director named Ernest Dickerson was looking for actors for a movie called *Juice* and they invited Money-B to audition. Dickerson had earned acclaim for his work as Spike Lee's director of photography on a run of films, including *She's Gotta Have It, School Daze, Do the Right Thing, Mo' Better Blues,* and *Jungle Fever.* Now he was writing and directing his first feature film, a portrait of inner-city life and a coming-of-age drama about four teenage boys growing up in Harlem.

While Tupac and members from Digital Underground rolled through the streets of New York in a limousine, attending New York's New Music Seminar and doing various press junkets, Money-B read through the script. He scanned the lines that were written for Steel, the part he was slated to audition for, but as he read, one of the other characters caught his attention. Money passed Tupac the script. "Look at the character Bishop. This dude is just like you," he told Tupac. "You should just come to the audition and read for this other part here."

Tupac's friend Treach, whom he had just met on the road months before, had been recommended to the casting agents by Queen Latifah, who would also be cast in the film. The next day, Money, Treach, and Tupac strolled into the William Morris Agency. Only Money and Treach had an official audition. They sat patiently and waited alongside the actors gathered to read for the various parts. "In our minds, if it all worked out, I'd have been Steel, Tupac would have been Bishop," Money-B recalled. "Treach would have been Q. We would have been real friends being friends in the movie, which would have been dope."

Money-B went in first and got a quick thanks-but-no-thanks. Treach auditioned next, and although he didn't snag one of the leads, he did end up cast in a smaller role. Dickerson then spotted Tupac in the waiting area and asked him if he wanted to audition. A few moments later, Tupac found himself in a room filled with casting agents and producers reading for the role of Q.

"What's your name?" they asked him.

"Tupac."

"Oh, that's an interesting name. What is that?"

Tupac proudly explained the origins of his name.

As soon as he was finished reading for Q, Dickerson had an idea.

"Can you stay longer? Can you read for this role?" Dickerson asked while handing him sides—short snippets of dialogue to study. It was dialogue for Bishop, the character that had reminded Money of Tupac. Tupac nodded, glanced at the paper, and stepped outside to study for a bit.

When he'd prepared himself, he went back in and stood in front of Dickerson and the rest of the filmmakers who held the fate of his dreams in their hands. "I read cold turkey, walked in there, picked up the sides and just read," he remembered later. "And I got that part. That was God."

"Tupac goes in the room," Money remembered. "All of a sudden you hear cheering. And people standing up and whistling and everything."

Dickerson and the others exchanged glances as Tupac left the room. They knew they'd found their Bishop. "The thing that he got that nobody else got was the pain," Dickerson recalled.

Producer David Heyman, who would go on to produce the Harry Potter films, was there and remembered that after the audition, "[Tupac] walked out of the room and he stuck his head back in and with a little wink and a smile, because he was mischievous, he says, 'You better give me the part because I know where y'all live,' and then he shut the door and walked out."

The film's producers invited the four potential leads to dinner together to see if they had chemistry. At the table with Tupac that evening were Jermaine Hopkins, who had appeared in the classic *Lean on Me* and was being considered for the role of Steel; Omar Epps, a student of LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts who would be cast as Q; and Khalil Kain, who had been an extra in *New Jack City* and had auditioned for the role of Raheem. By the end of the dinner, the producers were sold on the four young men's rapport. It was the perfect combination.

While Tupac waited for an official confirmation that he'd been cast in *Juice,* Atron continued to circulate his demo to record labels in New York and in Los Angeles. As the list of rejections continued to grow, Atron received some hopeful news. "Jeff Fenster of Charisma Records was the only man in the industry who got Tupac [at that point]," he said. But the hope was quickly dashed. Fenster could not convince Charisma's execs to make an offer.

Amid these rejections, Ernest Dickerson came through with a resounding *yes*—Tupac had officially landed the role in *Juice*. In a full-circle moment, *Juice* would shoot in his hometown of Harlem, just a short distance from the Apollo Theater, where six years earlier Tupac had gotten his first bite from the acting bug in *A Raisin in the Sun*. At a time when theater screens across the country were filling up with cinematic portrayals of life in the hood—especially that year, as films such as *New Jack City* and *Boyz n the Hood* opened to mammoth success, *Juice* seemed poised to break out.

Production began on March 14, 1991, less than two weeks after motorist Rodney King was beaten violently by four Los Angeles Police Department officers following a high-speed pursuit. The beating, captured on video and repeated endlessly across all news platforms, marked a watershed moment in race relations in America. Many Black Americans were ready to revolt against the racist oppression behind this reprehensible act. Tupac, angered as well, and sick and tired of the police continuing to misuse their power, wanted nothing more than to see these officers charged, hoping the world would finally start to see some change. But things would get worse in Los Angeles before they got better: Two days after filming started, Black teenager Latasha Harlins, a Westchester High School student, was shot by a Korean grocer over a $1.79 bottle of orange juice. Harlins had placed the bottle of juice in her backpack as she approached the register, two dollar bills in her hand, with the intention to pay. The city was a powder keg, ready to explode.

A coast away, Tupac settled in and prepared for his debut movie role. The film's producers rented him an apartment on the ninth floor of a building at Fifty-First Street and Seventh Avenue for the duration of the shoot. The pad soon became a hangout spot for some of his castmates, as well as a place to reconvene with friends he had met on tour, like Yo-Yo.

At first, Tupac's daily trips to the set went without a hitch. He showed up on time, for the most part, except a few early mornings when he disregarded the call sheet and kept the entire crew waiting. Cast members recalled conversations about this behavior, but Tupac shrugged it off. "Pac would get mad and walk off the set," Jermaine Hopkins recalled. Hopkins said that Tupac would tell his castmates, "They need us more than we need them. Do you know how much money it would cost to replace one of us right now and have to do this shit all over again?"

More often, though, Tupac left the selfish behavior at home and showed up to the set congenial and accommodating. The production shot outside most days, and many of the cast and crew noticed Tupac's natural propensity to engage with lookie-loos and homeless people. Bothered by periodic homelessness since he was young, he didn't hesitate to check on their well-being, talking with them and doing what he could to offer them words of encouragement. Some days he even made friends with passing fans as they walked by the set.

Social as he could be, when it came to acting, Tupac was focused. He dove deep into the role of Bishop, the film's antagonist, a character with a checkered past who harbored deep pain from a severely dysfunctional family life. His training from BSA and his short stint in Tam High's drama department shone through as producers watched the dailies. One of them, Preston Holmes, remembered how his initial skepticism melted away: "I was more than a little surprised, to put it mildly, that Tupac was so serious about the craft of acting. I guess I assumed this guy was just a rapper that they were sticking in this movie because he sold a few records and the headache of dealing with this on a day-to-day basis would be ours to deal with, but the truth was that this guy was a consummate pro. He was superb. He blew all of us away."

Tupac found a way to infuse his own life experiences into his thunderous performance, tapping into his deep reserves of anger. Tupac later explained his process: "When I get a part, first I just try to find out, you know, how does this character feel? Like I make the person up in my mind, what does he look like? Try to put a face to him, even though it's my face. I give him a walk. Give him an attitude. All you really have to do is relate to the character." In another interview, he recalled, "I am real…I stay real, I am never a story, never a script, never a character. Even when I'm playing a character, I am really that character. There is nothing fake. I just took everything and internalized it."

Tupac also tried to tap into what he believed to be the sentiments of many young Black men in America at that time. "You have to understand that character. He came from a broken home," he explained of Bishop in an interview. "No models, no role models, no real models. Nobody sat him down. All he did was eat breakfast at home and go in the street and get all of his education." In another interview, he said that *Juice* was "the story of today's young Black male and it needs to be told because police beating up brothers in the street. All that stuff still happens. And all this needs to be told." Speaking from Bishop's point of view, he explained, "I have no role models. That's why I went over the edge." At the height of Bishop's dramatic arc, he delivers the classic sinister lines: "I am crazy, but you know what else? I don't give a fuck!…I don't give a fuck about myself." Those lines captured the hopelessness that sometimes suffused not only Tupac's soul but the souls of so many across the country.

Tupac's portrayal of Bishop was so convincing that it would eventually blur the lines for some of the film's viewers, who collapsed the aggressive qualities of the character onto the actor. But the interplay was far more complex. Tupac's castmate Jermaine Hopkins spoke about Tupac's role as Bishop: "Was Tupac Bishop? No. Was Bishop's attitude inside of Tupac? Yes. Were there certain situations that could bring the Bishop out of Tupac?

Yes. Bishop was a character on a piece of paper. The personality of a Tupac Shakur in lifestyle and upbringing and trials and tribulations through life brought Bishop to life as a character. Those words on the script is just words on a script without putting any feeling behind him."

The production of *Juice* was not without drama. Tupac's movie trailer—his private space to get dressed and relax between scenes—was an active hangout, with friends and castmates coming and going, weed smoke wafting through the air inside the small space. According to his family, Tupac never liked to be alone and often surrounded himself with friends and family. Sometimes he even welcomed curious movie fans and passersby onto the set. But one afternoon his friendliness cost him. A few hours after inviting a stranger onto the set, Tupac realized that all of his gold jewelry was gone.

Tupac went off the rails at this violation of one of Afeni's cardinal rules: *Never steal from another*. Ernest Dickerson tried to calm him down by assuring him that they'd reimburse him for everything that was taken, but Tupac told him he would take care of it. Days later, someone spotted the suspect lurking around the perimeter of the set. Tupac and his friends ran toward him, grabbed him, and beat him up in the middle of the street before he finally was able to escape and run away.

After the incident, Tupac felt he needed a protector, a watchful eye. He called on a friend who had quickly become an integral part of his life.

Randy "Stretch" Walker was a fellow rap artist and producer. He and his brother, Majesty, were recording artists signed to Tommy Boy, performing under the name Live Squad. Stretch and Tupac had hit it off instantly when they met in Oakland and discovered their common love for rhyming about the realities of the streets. In Stretch, Tupac found a friend whose lyrics came from the same foundation as his own: the ills of crime-ridden urban communities and how they adversely affected the psyche of young Black children.

The two soon became inseparable. "Everywhere they went, they had to go together," Shock recalled. "They loved each other so much, they were crazy. They would stand in the living room kickin' each other with their arms locked. One faced one way and the other faced the other way. We'd watch for a minute and then we'd get back to playing dominoes. It would go on for twenty minutes straight."

Stretch had already been hanging out occasionally on the set of *Juice*. Now Tupac asked him to help ensure no one else came into his trailer for the remainder of the shoot. Stretch took the responsibility seriously. Once he and his six-foot-seven presence started to show up every morning, everyone was sure that no one else would be stealing from Tupac.

On set, Tupac spent his downtime reading the daily newspapers. One morning, he came across a story about a young mother who had thrown her newborn baby boy down a trash chute. He followed the story closely as the week went on, shaken by the details. He read that the girl was only twelve years old, and that the pregnancy was the result of her cousin raping her. Tupac was not only discouraged that the story didn't get front-page placement, but he couldn't understand how anyone who heard or read about it didn't stop to acknowledge the gravity of this horrific tragedy. The incest, the baby thrown in the trash—it was all too much for him to forget. He talked about it with castmates and crew throughout the day, and eventually grabbed one of his notebooks and began scribbling lyrics. "Pac was so troubled, like, the whole morning," his *Juice* co-star Omar Epps remembered. "Like, how could a woman do that? And so a few hours later he was like 'Yo, O, come here. He starts kickin' his rhyme."

The song was "Brenda's Got a Baby." "It was in my trailer while we was filming *Juice,*" Tupac recalled. "In between shots I wrote it. I was crying too. That's how I knew everybody else would cry, 'cause I was crying. It takes a lot to move me. But I was in tears because this little Black girl was all by herself and the next page I'm hearing about little debutantes and shit. That shit was just getting to me too much."

Production for *Juice* wrapped mid-April. On the last day on set, the cast and crew gathered in celebration, hopeful about the film's future on the big screen. Still waiting on a record deal, Tupac would head back to California to continue to record. As he left the set, one of the film's producers, Neal Moritz, congratulated him for his performance and teased him about spending so much of his money on gold chains and rings. Tupac quoted a few lines from his favorite Robert Frost poem: “So dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay.”

Moritz reassured him that he was going to be a big star in ten years. But Tupac, who had no illusions about the harrowing homicide statistics that plagued America’s young Black men, had already formed his own grim self-fulfilling prophecy.

“I’m not going to be alive,” Tupac responded.

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Throughout *Juice*’s production, Tupac had made it a priority to find his way to 1370 St. Nicholas Avenue in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan to visit Afeni, Sekyiwa, Aunt Jean, and the cousins. One evening, Tupac brought Money-B, Stretch, and Treach with him for his favorite meal: collard greens, potato salad, fried chicken, and candied yams, courtesy of Aunt Jean. During these visits, only five months after he’d put Afeni on a bus to New York, it became clear to Tupac that her drug habit had persisted. She’d been sitting in Aunt Jean’s bathroom to smoke crack and blowing the smoke out the window, still swimming in the deep, dark waters of addiction.

But in May of 1991, during a reunion of the Panther 21 on the twentieth anniversary of their acquittal, Afeni’s friends staged an intervention that would finally put her on the road to recovery. Ali Bey Hassan, one of her Panther 21 codefendants, convinced a hesitant Afeni to come to the celebration. Afterward, he and his wife, Sue, invited her to spend the night at their home in Connecticut, where the next morning she was invited by Ali and Sue’s daughter, Tonya, herself a recovering addict, to attend an AA meeting. On the first day, Tonya and Afeni went to two meetings together. By the end of the week, Afeni was attending three per day. This moment marked the beginning of the end of Afeni’s years-long battle with crack cocaine.

Afeni was clear-eyed on the toll it had taken, especially on her children. “My addiction affected their growth, their everything,” she reflected years later. “My sponsor…encouraged me to understand that my children and my sister and my nieces and my nephews, my family had a right to their own reaction and journey through their reaction to my devastating effect on their lives….I never want to have my son look at me in the way that he looked at me when I was using. I don’t want to see that in his eyes.”

Tupac visited Afeni while she was in recovery, taking the time to express his hurt and disappointment. Honesty had always been a key ingredient in their relationship and since, from Tupac’s perspective, Afeni had disregarded the very teachings she’d imparted on her children, he needed to be brutally honest with her before he could forgive her.

During one of the visits, Tupac put an envelope into Afeni’s hands. It held a thirteen-page letter written on brown stationery. “He’d taken his time to explain to me exactly what pain I had put him through,” Afeni remembers. “And although he was glad that I was in recovery, I should not expect for him to believe that it was true just because I said it. Tupac was such a wonderful yardstick for morality. He taught me that if I wanted to take responsibility for all the good that he did, I also had to take responsibility for the bad.”

—

Back on the West Coast, Tupac continued to record songs in the hopes of catching a label executive’s ear. In June, during a midnight session at Starlight Sound in Richmond, when everyone else in the world had forgotten about the newborn baby in New York who was thrown into an incinerator by his twelve-year-old mother, Tupac headed into a sound booth to record the song he had written on the *Juice* set two months earlier. With the tragedy still weighing heavily on his mind, he called on a producer he’d met through Money-B named Deon “Big D the Impossible” Evans. With Big D at the board, Tupac grabbed the microphone and delivered what would become one of his most iconic songs.

I hear Brenda's got a baby
But Brenda's barely got a brain
A damn shame, the girl can hardly spell her name

The song would become a single on his eventual debut album. "What I wanted to do is really build," he explained, "let everyone know *who* I was with 'Trapped' and what I was down for—the young Black male. With 'Brenda's Got a Baby,' I wanted to let everybody know that while I'm down for the young Black male, that also included the young Black sistas."

He had everything going for him—exposure with Digital Underground, a verse on the radio, his first major film finished and waiting for release. All he needed now was a record deal.

13

VIOLENT

1991–1992

> My words are weapons, and I'm stepping to the silent.
> Wakin' up the masses, but you claim I'm violent.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

On a summer day in 1991, Los Angeles–based entertainment lawyer Kim Guggenheim called Atron Gregory with a casual suggestion that changed the course of Tupac's life. "I just met this A&R guy from some new start-up company called Interscope," Guggenheim told Atron. "His name is Tom Whalley. You should reach out to him."

Whalley, a thirty-nine-year-old New Jersey native with surfer looks and an ear for talent, was already a major industry figure, having worked his way up from the mailroom at Warner Bros. Records to the A&R department, signing headline acts like Modern English and the Cure. From there he moved to Capitol Records, signing the Australian band Crowded House, and blues superstar Bonnie Raitt. After falling out with the Capitol top brass for signing Raitt—they thought she wasn't the right fit for the label—Whalley got the last word when her album, *Nick of Time,* won three Grammys and eventually sold 5 million copies. He was looking for something new when he met with Ted Field, a film producer and heir to the Marshall Field retail empire. Field worked in movies but loved music and wanted to start an independent record label, one that would nurture artists who valued freedom of expression. To Whalley, who lived for the process of creating music and valued the artist's vision first and foremost, this sounded like the perfect business model.

The dream team that Field eventually put together to help run the label included Whalley and industry veteran John McClain. Field ultimately teamed with producer Jimmy Iovine, who had worked with Bruce

Springsteen and John Lennon, to form Interscope Records. Rather than focus on genre, they sought to fill their roster with quality artists who could give listeners a glimpse into their lives, maybe sometimes even their souls. They sought out unconventional storytellers. “We took extreme artists and gave them freedom and then had the mainstream come to them, instead of compromising the artist to get the mainstream,” Whalley said. And the business decisions were guided by the artist-first mentality baked into the label’s foundation. “I was able to empower the artists I signed. I had complete backing from Ted, which allowed for aggressive financial support of the artists’ careers.”

Iovine had given the label its first hit with Ecuadorian pop singer Gerardo’s “Rico Suave” just the year before. Whalley added the alternative band Primus, and then San Francisco’s 4 Non Blondes. Soon after, a Bostonian named Mark Wahlberg, who would be introduced to the world with his group as Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch, was signed, as well as Trent Reznor’s Nine Inch Nails and Helmet.

When Atron Gregory gave Whalley Tupac’s demo, he was immediately captivated by the lyrics of “Words of Wisdom” and “Trapped.” “I was excited about what I was hearing,” recalled Whalley, “and passed the music to Ted, Jimmy, and John.”

Field knew Tupac then as “the dancer guy for Shock G,” but soon he would be a name in his own right. Field’s routine for listening to demos was to put the cassette into his car stereo while he drove; if he didn’t like it, he’d fling the tape into the back seat and pop in another. Tupac’s demo never saw the back seat. Instead, it found its way into the hands of Field’s twelve-year-old daughter, Danielle, who listened to rap and would, Field knew, give him a more objective opinion. She loved it.

Whalley had the same reaction. Atron had given him a handful of demos, and Whalley chose two artists from the stack: Money-B and Tupac. Upon listening, he called Atron and requested meetings with both, but when Money-B decided to sign with Hollywood Records, Whalley wasn’t going to risk losing out on signing Tupac: “I want to sign him,” he told Atron.

Within days, Tupac was on a plane from Oakland to Burbank, where he, Whalley, and Whalley's assistant got to know each other over a quick meal at a banquette at the airport Holiday Inn restaurant. Whalley asked Tupac to talk about what was behind the lyrics of his songs, and Tupac responded with genuine concern for his community. As ever, he said he wanted "to represent the young Black male. No one in my community believes they're gonna live past twenty-five and they feel oppressed." Whalley was both impressed and moved. "I was looking for someone who had an artistic point of view."

After the meeting, Tupac headed back to the airport terminal to catch his flight home. Whalley recalled that as he and his assistant left the restaurant, his assistant said, "He's so handsome. Did you see the eyelashes? And his eyes?" Whalley had. But he had seen much more than that. On the drive home he thought to himself, *This guy's a poet with something important to say and I'm gonna back him.*

Days later, Tupac returned to Los Angeles to sit down for dinner at Genghis Cohen on Fairfax with Tom Whalley and Ted Field. Immediately, Field put him at ease with exciting news. "Look, so that this can be a relaxed dinner, just know we're signing you," he told Tupac. "You don't have to worry. If you want to be with us, this is happening."

Tupac was elated, but also relieved. Finally, he could take a moment to exhale. In that moment, his dream of becoming a recording artist had come true. Someone was giving him the platform from which he could broadcast his indictment of America's social oppression. "You know, if this hadn't happened, I don't know what I would have done," he told them. "I felt like I was gonna explode. I have so much inside of me, so much I want to say, so much music."

The mood around the table turned celebratory. "Well," said Field, "now you don't have to explode."

On August 15, 1991, Tupac signed contracts that made it official: He was the first rap artist ever on Interscope Records.

While Tupac went back into the studio to put the finishing touches on his debut album, Whalley flew across the country to meet with executives at

East West Records America, an imprint of Interscope's partner label, Atlantic Records. Since Interscope was still new and, to that point, mostly invested in rock and pop, it didn't yet have the marketing and promotions machine it needed to launch a rap artist. It was a different world. Relative to rock or pop acts, hip-hop artists and their labels faced significant barriers when trying to bring new acts to market. Radio play for rap was practically nonexistent throughout the '80s except for on smaller stations like KDAY, an L.A.-based AM radio station, one of the first to integrate rap and hip-hop music into its daily rotation. On TV, the widest opportunity for exposure was through niche programming like *Video Music Box* and *Yo! MTV Raps,* the music video network's late-night segment dedicated to rap music. Breaking a rap artist meant tapping into new marketing channels, and Whalley hoped that East West, Atlantic's urban music division, would be able to help.

Whalley waited in the lobby for over an hour and was finally led to the office of one of East West's marketing executives. After a short listening session, the exec looked at Whalley and said, "This is no good."

Bewildered, Whalley didn't know what to say.

"What makes you think you know anything about rap music?" the exec asked him, straight-faced.

"I don't know," Whalley replied. "But I do know I understand good music."

"Well, I can tell you don't know anything about *rap* music, 'cause this isn't any good," said the exec, handing the cassette back to him.

Whalley returned to the office panicked. He told Field that Atlantic was not going to help promote Tupac's album. He also told Field that he didn't want to lead Tupac on with false hope and that he would be calling him to tell him the bad news: They didn't have the support to launch his album, and they were going to release him from his deal. If they didn't have the right marketing machine, a team who knew how to launch and support a debut rap album, it was literally impossible to break an artist.

But Field had another idea. He asked Whalley if he liked the album.

Whalley said yes.

“Well, I like the record too. Do you believe in Tupac?”

“Of course I do.”

“I believe in him too.” Field’s belief also meant his financial backing; he had the personal means to market any Interscope artist that Atlantic didn’t feel confident in supporting. “You’re a smart guy, figure it out,” Field said. “Just tell me how much money you need.”

Immediately, Whalley called Atron Gregory, who was busy fielding calls of disbelief from major players, many of whom had already rejected Tupac, like Tommy Boy’s and Def Jam’s executives. “Why the hell did you put Interscope in the rap business?” they asked, calling out the label’s inexperience.

Atron’s response was simple. “None of you guys wanted to sign him. What did you want me to do?”

Whalley let Atron know that Atlantic was dubious and wouldn’t help promote, but that it didn’t matter. “We got Ted’s support,” he said. “We’re gonna do it ourselves.”

—

With the advance from Interscope, Tupac leased a second apartment, this one in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles, a short drive to most Hollywood movie lots and L.A.’s recording studios. The three-bedroom flat had more than enough room to accommodate Afeni, who was on a path to recovery and had flown to California to celebrate Tupac’s burgeoning success.

In short order, the record had a tentative title, *2Pacalypse Now,* and a release date of November 12. In preparation for Tupac’s debut, music journalist Salvatore Manna would interview Tupac at his home. On the day they agreed to meet, Manna arrived at Tupac’s new apartment and was greeted at the door by Afeni holding a plate of warm, homemade chocolate-chip cookies. Manna, who over the course of his career would interview the likes of Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, and Kurt Cobain, was pleasantly taken aback. “I’ve never had an artist or an artist’s mother ever do that,” he said later.

As he and Tupac settled in for a quiet conversation, just the two of them, Tupac's crew, his circle of friends, was nowhere in sight. No loud music. No party in the background. Tupac told him that the most important aspect of his music was its positive message: "People are good and there is hope." But he didn't spare Manna the flip side. "Life for the young Black male is hard. It's not *The Cosby Show,*" he said. He hoped his listeners would identify with his "pain growing up poor." "We need someone who's still in the streets, someone who stands for something," he told Manna. Summing up the themes of the album, he said, "*2Pacalpyse Now* is a battle cry. A non-bullshit record about how we really live, really feel. Hip-hop's a mirror reflection of our culture today. Everything put on wax will be remembered and 'Pray' is not how we're living in the nineties."

Manna was sold. "You have an extraordinary son," he told Afeni that day.

"He will do great things," she said, proudly. Then she paused for a moment. Her expression turned firm. "If he lives long enough."

—

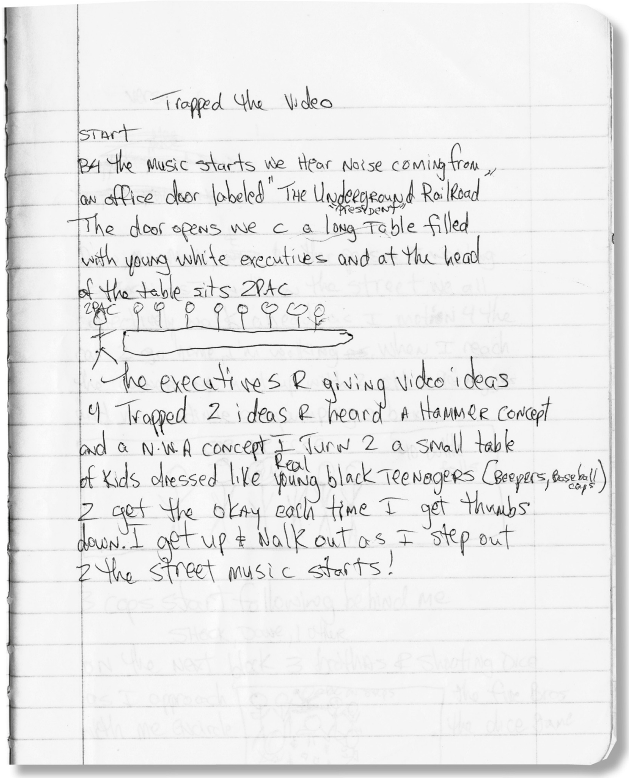
On September 25, 1991, just two months after he signed with Interscope, the rollout for *2Pacalpyse Now* began with the release of the first single, "Trapped." Tupac had already been plotting what he wanted to do for the music videos. Through Money-B, he met up-and-coming twin brother filmmakers Allen and Albert Hughes, who had done videos for Money's side group, Raw Fusion. Tupac had the label schedule a time for the brothers to come into the office. He told Whalley, "I want to hire these brothers for my videos. They're in college."

"In college?!" Whalley asked, concerned, wondering if they had enough experience to handle making a major music video. He asked Tupac how much money he needed to pay them.

"Seventy-five grand. For both videos, 'Trapped' and 'Brenda's Got a Baby.' "

Whalley wasn't sure he'd heard right. "For *both* videos? That's all?" The number was a fraction of what it would cost to use industry professionals.

Tupac originally envisioned the "Trapped" video opening with a dramatization of a record-label meeting in which he sat at the head of a boardroom table filled with white executives while a crew of "kids dressed like real young Black teenagers" gave a thumbs-up or -down to each of the executives' ideas. Once the Hughes brothers were hired, the concept changed to teenagers shooting dice on an Oakland street corner. Tupac made sure his friends Mike Cooley, Man-Man, and Money-B were cast as the homies. When a police car rolls up, they run. The video shifts to Tupac rapping from a prison cell, and cuts in and out of scenes with him and Shock G talking in a prison visiting area. Shock delivers the hook: *"Uh-uh, they can't keep the Black man down."*



Trapped the Video
START
B4 the music starts we Hear Noise coming from
an office door labeled "The Underground Railroad"
The door opens we c a "President" long Table filled
with young white executives and at the head
of the table sits 2PAC
2PAC
the executives R giving video ideas
4 Trapped 2 ideas R heard a Hammer concept
and a N.W.A concept I Turn 2 a small table
of Kids dressed like Real young black Teenagers (Beepers, Baseball caps)
2 get the okay each time I get thumbs
down. I get up & walk out as I step out
2 the street music starts!

Tupac's vision for the video for his song "Trapped."

Click here to view as text

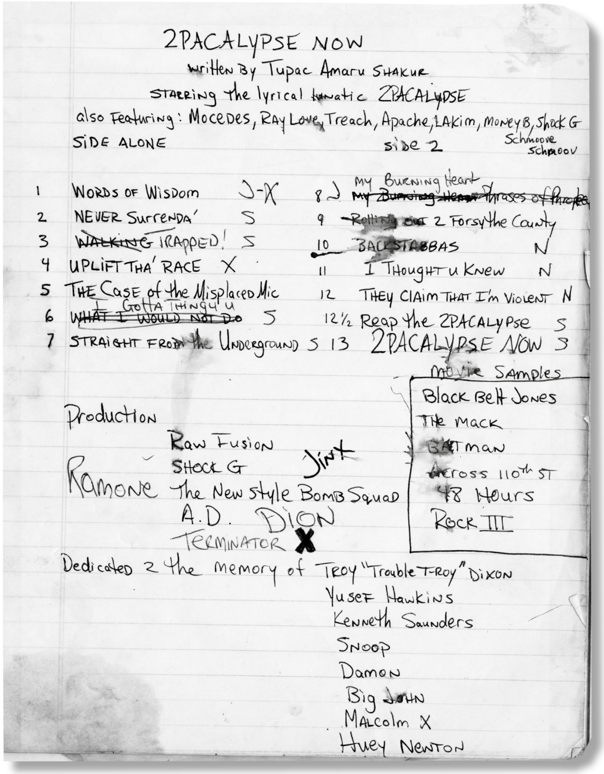
"When that shit came on MTV, I was sitting next to him," remembered Ray Luv. "We were eating and waiting for the video to come on. We kept saying, 'Man, it's gonna be on today. I know it's gonna be on today. We just sat there eating wings from Original Buffalo Wings in San Rafael. [Then] Dr. Dre and Ed Lover premiered the video and we went crazy."

—

Less than a month after "Trapped" was released, on October 17, 1991, at 12:45 in the afternoon, and weeks before *2Pacalpyse Now* was set to be released, Tupac was traveling by limousine through Oakland with the members of Digital Underground. When they stopped at Union Bank downtown, Tupac took a few minutes getting out of the car while the others jetted across the street and into the bank. "We were about to do something big," Shock G recalled of that day. "Maybe we were getting paid, maybe we were getting money to go out of town. The whole group went in the bank… and for some reason Pac was still outside."

Finally, Tupac jumped out of the limo and made his way across Broadway at Seventeenth Street toward the entrance of the bank. But before he got there, two Oakland police officers, Kevin Rodgers and Alexander Boyovich, stepped in front of him, blocking his path. They asked Tupac for identification as one of the officers flipped open his ticket book. They told him they were going to cite him for jaywalking. Tupac was incredulous. "They were sweating me for jaywalking, and I swear to you I don't even know what jaywalking is," he later recalled.

Tupac asked why they were charging him with such a petty crime and explained that he was with the group Digital Underground and that they were already inside the bank. He further explained that he was just there to withdraw money from his account and handed one of the officers his driver's license and two additional forms of identification. The officer laughed as he stared at his ID. "Tupac?!" the officer mocked. "What your mother name you that for?"



2PACALYPSE NOW
written By Tupac Amaru SHAKUR
STARRING the lyrical lunatic 2PACALYPSE
also Featuring: Mocedes, Ray Love, Treach, Apache, LAkim, Money B, Shock G, Schmoove Schmoov

SIDE ALONE

1 WORDS OF WISDOM J-X
2 NEVER Surrenda' S
3 ~~WALKING~~ TRAPPED! S
4 UPLIFT THA' RACE X
5 THE Case of the Misplaced Mic
6 ~~WHAT I WOULD NOT DO~~ I Gotta Thing 4 U S
7 STRAIGHT FROM the Underground S

Side 2

8 My Burning Heart ~~My Burning Heart~~ ~~Phrases of Prophecy~~
9 ~~Rolling out~~ 2 Forsythe County
10 BACKSTABBAS N
11 I Thought u Knew N
12 THEY CLAIM THAT I'm Violent N
12½ Reap the 2PACALYPSE S
13 2PACALYPSE NOW S

Movie Samples
Black Belt Jones
The Mack
Batman
Across 110th ST
48 Hours
Rock III

Production
Raw Fusion
Shock G
Jinx
Ramone
The New style Bomb Squad
A.D.
Dion
Terminator X

Dedicated 2 the memory of Troy "Trouble T-Roy" Dixon
Yusef Hawkins
Kenneth Saunders
Snoop
Damon
Big John
Malcolm X
Huey Newton

One of the first of many iterations of a handwritten track list for Tupac's debut album, *2Pacalypse Now.*

Click here to view as text

Tupac had always hated people mocking his name. From his days in New York when the neighborhood kids teased him and his cousins for their attire and their names to his years in Baltimore when his teachers had a hard time pronouncing it and his schoolmates laughed at it. And now this cop was giving it to him?

Just weeks after shooting his debut music video, a five-minute piece that he hoped would send a message to the world that young Black men felt "trapped" in their communities, highlighting the ongoing police harassment and abuse of power, Tupac seethed as he faced derision and ridicule. But this time it wasn't a dramatization in his music videos. This was real.

Tupac exploded with defiance. "Man, fuck the police! Give me my citation."

One of the officers put Tupac in a chokehold and threw him on the ground.

Tupac yelled up at them, “This is not slavery and you’re not my masters!”

“Master?” Rodgers said. “I like the sound of that.” Then he pummeled Tupac’s head into the sidewalk.

Tupac recounted the incident in a press conference weeks later: “My spirit was broke. ’Cause after I made consciousness again, they kept joking about ‘I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!’ ’cause I couldn’t breathe. The breath was taken from me.”

The cops hauled the disoriented and bloodied Tupac off the ground and shoved him into the back of the squad car. It would be seven full hours before he was taken from a holding cell to receive medical attention. But worse than the bruises were the scars the incident would leave on his soul. Afeni had always feared something like this would happen to her son. She explains this as a rite of passage of sorts: “After he had been beaten by the Oakland police, that changed Tupac. Young Black men go through that process where they get great anger at the reality of life for a young Black male.”

And as he lay with his head smashed into the pavement on the streets of Oakland, he saw clearly that the war his mother had long fought had come for him.

Weeks later, Tupac hired Oakland-based civil rights attorney John Burris to file a $10 million civil lawsuit against the Oakland Police Department. Burris scheduled a press conference so that Tupac could give his account publicly. He explained that after the officers told him he needed to learn his place, he ended up unconscious in the gutter, woke up with blood on his face, and found himself on his way to jail for resisting arrest. He spoke into the microphone with conviction: “That’s harassment to me, that I have to be stopped in the middle of the street and checked like we’re in South Africa and asked for my ID. Officer Boyovich repeatedly slammed my face into the floor while Rodgers put the cuffs on me—that’s not called for—for jaywalking.”

In an interview, Tupac explained exactly what he would do if he was granted any money as a result of the claim. “If I win and get the money,” he said, “the Oakland Police Department is going to buy a boys’ home, me a house, my family a house and a Stop Police Brutality Center.” The claim was later resolved with a settlement. The payout was a mere $42,000.

In an interview the following year, Tupac sat across from BET’s Tanya Hart and showed America the scars that the officers from the Oakland Police Department left on his face as he addressed the general subject of police brutality. “Let me show you what they did to Tupac Shakur,” he said. “All that movie, that didn’t mean nothing to OPD. I was still a N-I-double-G-A. And they proved it. And if you can see this, Mr. Cameraman. All of this is scars I’ll go to my grave with. These are ‘learn to be a nigga’ scars.”

In time, Tupac would also come to understand the beating as a more specific response to his success. “I had no record all my life,” he told BET’s Ed Gordon. “No police record, until I made a record.”

—

Still on schedule, on November 12, 1991, Tupac’s debut album, *2Pacalypse Now*, was released.

The following weeks were filled with celebrations. TNT and Interscope hosted a pajama party at San Francisco’s Club 650. All Tupac had wanted was to put a record out and to be in a movie, and now it was official—by the age of twenty, he’d checked off both boxes. Sporting a pair of plaid PJs, he celebrated that night with those closest to him. “This was one of the few times in Tupac’s life where he actually celebrated an achievement,” Atron remembered of that night. “But even still, it was an album-release party, so essentially it was work.”

On the heels of the release of *2Pacalypse Now,* Paramount rolled out its marketing campaign for *Juice*. Tupac enjoyed his prominence on the promotional poster as Bishop, right up front, a haunting, hooded presence with hands folded, holding a steel revolver. But as the release date of the film approached, Atron received a phone call from the studio to let him know that they were amending the poster and taking out the gun. “We decided that the image of four young men was strong enough. We took the gun out," read a statement from Paramount Studio. Tupac wasn't buying it. He immediately assumed that the studio found it too threatening to have a Black man holding a gun on a movie poster. And a few days later when he opened the newspaper to find that the altered movie art, with his gun removed, had been placed directly next to an advertisement for a film called *Kuffs,* starring Christian Slater—whose character was holding a gun—he knew he was right.

Tupac was furious with what he perceived as a racial double standard. "It hurts me that they let a white dude, Christian Slater, stand right next to me in the paper," he told *Right On* magazine. "He can have a gun, but the niggas can't?" He noted that it wasn't just an issue with *Juice*. "I don't like that in [the art for] *The Last Boy Scout,* Bruce Willis gets a gun and Damon Wayans gets a football. I don't like that in *Terminator 2* [Arnold Schwarzenegger] gets a big, extra-large, super supreme gun, and he's an American hero."

On Friday, January 17, 1992, *Juice* hit theaters across the country. *The New York Times* called Tupac "the film's most magnetic figure."

America had now been introduced to Tupac through film and music: through the politically charged lyrics of *2Pacalypse Now,* in the music videos for "Trapped" and "Brenda's Got a Baby," and as a lead in his very first motion picture. The growing exposure over the course of 1991 and into the new year had transformed him from a virtual unknown to a recognizable figure: a rising rap star and a Hollywood movie star. In the weeks and months following the film's opening, whether Tupac walked through the streets of Oakland, Los Angeles, or New York, he frequently found himself surrounded by fans—many of them girls—screaming his name, sometimes even calling out his *Juice* character's name, Bishop.

That intense energy surrounded the film as well. At theaters throughout the nation, the packed, rowdy crowds brought a chaotic, sometimes violent element, leading to canceled screenings and increased security. On the press tour with his castmates, journalists often aimed their questions directly at Tupac, insinuating that the Bishop character's aggressive and psychotic nature was the primary cause of the violence. Tupac pushed back. He defended both the character and his portrayal in defending the film itself. “The film is talking about very real problems that are happening today,” he said. “Whether we talk about them or not. Whether we have a film about them or not. They’re gonna happen. And whether the movie is a Black film or a Latino film or Filipino film there’s gonna be violence at the theater…. But it’s not Ernest Dickerson’s *Juice* that makes people go fight….Every movie that’s out today there’s a gun and nobody notices that except when it happens with a Black film.”

As the movie drew more focus on Tupac, much of it negative, Lori Earl, his publicist at Interscope, knew it was time to bring in someone to help. She called Karen Lee, one of her colleagues from Rogers & Cowan, a PR agency where they had once worked together. The call was a little bit of kismet: Karen had met Tupac before—twenty years earlier, when he was just a baby, two months old, wrapped in a blanket in Afeni’s arms while they listened to Louis Farrakhan speak at a rally at the Armory in New York. Karen recognized the name instantly, but she wasn’t certain if it was the same Tupac until the moment she saw him at CBS Studios in Studio City, Los Angeles. She was stunned by Tupac’s remarkable resemblance to her old friend Billy Garland, and she knew he must be Billy’s son. Not wanting to presume, she mentioned casually that she and Tupac’s mother had a mutual friend named Billy Garland who lived in Jersey City. When Karen realized Tupac didn’t recognize the name, she decided to let it go.

From the start of her work with Tupac, Karen had a lot on her plate. First on the list was to cancel all of his upcoming press interviews for *Juice*. She recalls, “He didn’t have anything to do with [the violence] in the theaters. He was an actor in the movie,” she said later. “I didn’t think it was fair for him to be put in a situation where he was going to be blamed.”

Yet Karen could only do so much. More visibility meant more scrutiny, and on the heels of *Juice*’s release and the subsequent theater violence, Tupac found himself under public indictment not just for the movie but for the lyrics of *2Pacalypse Now* as well. The album was being caught up in a growing storm surrounding the themes of the genre labeled as “gangsta rap.” Popularized in the previous decade by artists like Ice-T and N.W.A on the West Coast and Schoolly D on the East, the genre's lyrical content reflected urban realism and the culture of street gangs with their hit songs like "Fuck tha Police" and "P.S.K." By early 1992, the country had become a racial tinderbox and the issue became political, stirring up contentious disputes in state legislatures and law-enforcement agencies across the nation, and even reaching the floor of the U.S. Senate. Advocates on both sides of the political aisle attempted to censor and stop the sale of the music, deeming such violent lyrics a detriment to the moral foundation of America at large.

At the center of the controversy was the song "Cop Killer" by Ice-T's thrash-metal band, Body Count, which appeared on their self-titled record released in March of that year by Sire Records. The lyrics mentioned the Rodney King incident and raged against police brutality bluntly and with enough rage to capture the nation's attention. But artists stood by their word that they were just *reporting,* not *inciting.* They were sharing their perspectives and allowing listeners to gain an inside look at the world through their lenses. Nevertheless, "Cop Killer" turned the firestorm directly toward Time Warner, the parent company of Interscope's distributor.

That Tupac's music would be swept so directly into the debate was the result of a tragic incident that occurred in Texas on the night of April 11, 1992. When nineteen-year-old Ronald Ray Howard was pulled over for a broken headlight by Texas Department of Public Safety trooper Bill Davidson, a deadly altercation followed during which Howard shot Davidson, who died three days later. As part of Howard's legal defense, a year later, hoping to spare him the death penalty, the public defender claimed that his client had been influenced by the lyrics on *2Pacalypse Now,* the cassette tape found in the stolen car's tape deck. Specifically, they cited the song "Soulja's Story."

For most of Tupac's career, he found himself having to defend his lyrics. In an interview for his album, he explained that his songs are "rebel songs, just like, you know, back in the '60s, we used to have folk songs you know, 'Sixteen Tons.'…That's what this is. This is soul music. It's like music for us to carry on with, for us to move on…battle songs…songs talking about strong Black men fighting back…. You never hear a song about me just walking up and shooting a cop. It's always provoked. It's always self-defense…. I don't rap about we shall overcome and peace 'cause that's a dream."

As public outrage continued to swirl around gangsta rap and explicit lyrics in general—especially those involving violence and cops—Tom Whalley started to feel pressure from executives at Time Warner. He asked Tupac to sit down with him in his office to discuss the controversy his lyrics were drawing. Tupac explained to Whalley that he wasn't *telling* people to shoot police and that instead he was talking about the feelings of what young Black men experience when they sit and look out the window at the police patrolling their neighborhoods every day. Further, he explained that Black males have these feelings because when they walk out their front door, more times than not, they're going to be harassed by the police. He said that this type of repetitive treatment was the seed planted in a young Black man's psyche, one that ultimately grows into a burning hatred for law enforcement in general. "And I'm representing their feelings," he told Whalley.

Whalley got it. He heard Tupac. He vowed to support his artist, though even then he couldn't have known how much Tupac would be tested by what lay ahead.

14

ONLY GOD CAN JUDGE ME

1992

> Mista, Police, please try to see
> that it's a million motherfuckers stressin' just like me.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

With *Juice*'s success, despite the controversy, Tupac hoped his next movie role would broaden his range as an actor. "I want a *Terminator 2* role," he said in an interview, "something different so people can really see the diversity. Because even now I think some people are going, 'Well, wait a minute, that's just him being him. How hard is it to be crazy?' Now I want to do something sane, or I want to be in love, or something so people can see the diversity of what I can do."

Soon he would get that chance. Filmmaker John Singleton, who had just come off the blockbuster *Boyz n the Hood,* contacted Atron through Tupac's agent and scheduled a meeting with Tupac to talk about his next movie, a romantic drama called *Poetic Justice*. Initially, Singleton had rapper-actor Ice Cube in mind for the male lead, but when Cube asked Singleton to change a few things in the script, Singleton refused, and in the end he couldn't persuade Cube to sign on for the love story, even though pop superstar/actor Janet Jackson had already committed to play the female lead. Tupac looked at the opportunity to play a romantic role to diversify his portfolio, and when he discovered he'd be cast alongside Jackson, he knew he had to land the part. The initial meeting was about as informal as it got. "Tupac, John, and I just sat in my car and talked," Atron remembered. "And at some point during that conversation, John looked at Pac and said, 'I want you to be my De Niro and I'm gonna be your Scorsese.' "

To gauge the chemistry between Tupac and Janet, Singleton arranged for a screen test at one of the film's tentative sets, a beauty shop in L.A.'s affluent, largely Black Ladera Heights neighborhood. “He was excited,” Atron recalled. “With me he was giggling, he was bouncing off the walls with excitement, but when he got there to do it, the people around would’ve never known. When he got there he was cool. He put his game face on and did the reading.”

Singleton knew instantly. “We screen tested Tupac and Janet because [Columbia Pictures] were nervous about either of them or both of them acting,” he said. “When we screen tested them together…magic. Green light.”

On April 14, 1992, Tupac began work on *Poetic Justice*. The role of Lucky, a charming postal worker who falls for Justice, an aspiring poet, would require something far different from the transformations he had made for Bishop. “If Bishop from *Juice* was a reflection of the young Black male of today, I wouldn’t be honest if I didn’t show another reflection,” he said in an on-set interview. “All of our young Black males are not violent. They’re all not taking the law into their own hands. They all are not going to that extreme to accomplish some sort of achievement in their life. So this is just another way of showing how you can be a young Black male and accomplish something. Lucky is doing it the opposite way that Bishop did. He’s working. He’s very responsible. He’s deliberate about the things he’s doing. He’s taking care of his daughter. He’s a respectful person. He’s living at home with his mother. He’s not sweating it. That’s where he wants to be. He wants to set goals and accomplish something.”

As happy as Tupac was about landing this role, he still found himself embroiled in conflict on the set. One afternoon, a growing feud between Tupac and one of the extras on the film started to escalate. The extra had been mocking Tupac, referring to him as “Four-Pack” every chance he got. Tupac wouldn’t let it go, and soon found himself in a heated argument.

The fight was quelled by an unlikely source of grace. Legendary poet Maya Angelou was on set that day; Singleton had incorporated her poetry into the film’s screenplay and asked her if she would do a cameo. When she walked out of her trailer and saw two young men on the brink of a fight, she felt compelled to intervene. To bring Tupac’s anger level down a notch, she gently put her hand on his shoulder and said in her regal, soothing voice, “Let me speak to you.”

At first, Tupac couldn’t be calmed. He continued to curse at the extra as some people scattered while others closed in to see a fight.

But Angelou pressed him, maintaining her gentle temperament. “Let me speak to you,” she repeated.

It took a minute, but her insistence worked. The two walked away from the small group of people who had stuck around hoping to see the lead actor beat up an extra. Or vice versa. When they were alone, Angelou looked into Tupac’s eyes and said, “Do you know how much you mean to us? Do you know that hundreds of years of struggle have been for you? Please, baby, take a minute. Don’t lose your life on a zoom.” She put her arm around him. “Do you know our people slept, lay spoon fashion, in the filthy hatches of slave ships so that you could live two hundred years later? Do you know that our people stood on auction blocks so that you can live?”

Tupac listened, rapt.

“When’s the last time anyone told you how important you are?” she asked.

Angelou recalled the moment later in an interview: “He started to weep. The tears came down. That was Tupac Shakur. I took him, I walked him down into a little gully and kept his back to the people so they wouldn’t see him, and I used my hands to dry his cheeks.”

Days into the filming of *Poetic Justice,* Tupac’s publicist, Karen, had an idea. With Legs dead, and Billy absent, and both Mutulu and Geronimo Pratt still in prison, Karen thought Tupac might benefit from having a strong Black “father” figure in his life, even if only in the capacity of a career mentor. With that in mind, she introduced him to Bill Duke, a Black actor and director then nearing fifty. A character actor of imposing stature, Duke had played memorable roles in action films like *Commando* and *Predator* while simultaneously cultivating a career as a director in television. The previous year, he had directed his first feature, *A Rage in Harlem,* with Forest Whitaker and Danny Glover. Karen felt that since Bill was established in Hollywood on both sides of the camera, Tupac might be interested in cultivating a friendship. And maybe, she thought, Bill could share his acting experiences with Tupac and help him on his journey to become the A-list actor he hoped to be.

Tupac and Bill got to know each other over chicken and waffles at Roscoe's off Pico and LaBrea. Bill told Tupac about the movie he'd just finished, and Tupac shared parts of his life and future plans. Duke was impressed. "He talked about his belief systems," he later recalled. "He talked about our community. He talked about this country and the world. He was a brilliant young man." Bill accepted the role that Karen had bestowed upon him as a mentor and role model, and a few weeks later he invited Tupac to be his guest at the premiere of his new movie, *Deep Cover.*

Karen also watched a friendship develop between Tupac and Janet Jackson over the course of *Poetic Justice*'s production. Janet had already become a household name from her smash albums *Control* and *Rhythm Nation 1814*. Tupac thought that since they'd become friends, he would ask her to star in one of his music videos. She accepted and showed up to the one-day video shoot in downtown Los Angeles at Union Station for "If My Homie Calls," the third and final single off Tupac's debut album.

On another day off, Janet and her husband, dancer-director René Elizondo, Jr., invited Tupac to join them at Six Flags Magic Mountain, a theme park thirty miles north of Hollywood. Even though their planned day at the amusement park fell on the same day as Bill's *Deep Cover* premiere, Tupac thought he would be able to get back to Hollywood on time. Toward the end of the day, though, as the group lingered at the amusement park, Tupac grew anxious, realizing he might not make it back. Tupac found himself inside this new space of juggling famous friends and commingling commitments. He wound up missing the movie and felt horrible over breaking his promise to Bill that he'd attend. Karen Lee remembered, "It *really* upset him that he didn't get back in time," because he'd hoped to form the beginnings of a relationship with his new mentor.

Two weeks into the production of *Poetic Justice,* on April 29, 1992, a jury in the Los Angeles suburb of Simi Valley acquitted the four police officers who had beaten Rodney King—an outcome widely seen among

Black and many white Americans as a gross miscarriage of justice. Black residents in Los Angeles were outraged. The anger poured into the streets, and within three hours of the acquittals South Central Los Angeles was on fire.

On the set of *Poetic Justice,* the cast and crew looked on, and emotions ran high. Singleton alerted everyone that he'd be pausing production and sent everyone home. Days later, at a park, amid a packed crowd at a weekend softball game, Tupac was approached by the foreign press. At one point, the journalist turned his attention from the action on the field and asked Tupac his thoughts on the riots: "What were your feelings last week when you saw what was happening to the city?"

"I hate to say I told you so, but I told you so. I was feeling beautiful to see all the unity," he replied. "But then again I was feeling nervous because I know America's not going to let the riots go on long, and I was worried that we was gon' lose a lot of people. This is a time for America to look at how they look at minorities." Tupac continued, "Either you live or you die by your ignorance. Either we change or we all fall."

Because of the temporary hiatus in shooting *Poetic Justice,* Tupac had the chance to jump on a red-eye flight to Atlanta and hang out with Shock G, Money-B, and the rest of the Digital Underground crew, who were on a six-show tour of the South. After the five-hour cross-country flight, he landed in the early morning hours and hopped in a cab. He spotted the tour bus parked in front of a hotel, jumped on board, and walked down the aisle gently nudging everyone awake. Still half-asleep, Shock looked up at Tupac through one eye. Before he could say anything, though, a groggy voice rang out from the back of the dark bus: "Man, you really fuckin' with Janet Jackson?"

After spending the morning catching up, Tupac and the others looked through the latest *Billboard* magazine. While Shock scanned the charts for DU's new album, *Sons of the P,* Tupac checked the progress of *2Pacalypse Now*. He noticed it still hadn't gotten anywhere near Digital Underground's place on the charts. The success of the group's most recent single, "Kiss You Back," had recently pushed their album to Gold certification, marking

500,000 copies sold. Tupac's album, however, was nowhere near the top of the charts. For those coveted spots, he'd have to compete with top-selling artists like Queen, Mariah Carey, U2, Michael Jackson, and TLC. His record had just pushed past the 300,000-unit sales mark, but that wouldn't be good enough. He squinted at the *Billboard* publication and then shifted his stare to Shock, who looked back at him, waiting for him to say something.

Tupac threw the *Billboard* down on the table. Frustrated, he made his final statement. "Well, if I could get a beat like 'Kiss You Back'!"

Shock promised he would send Tupac some beats. But the moment marked more than just a simple request. Shock remembered this as a pivotal shift in Tupac's mission around his music. "Pac used to pick all the beats for his albums, and some of the ones he picked I didn't think they were Platinum records, but Pac wasn't a pop, mass-appeal type; he wasn't targeting radio," he recalled. "He looked for beats that expressed the mood of his lyrics. He was making art. So when he hit with me on the bus that day, that's the first time I ever heard that emotion come from him. That shit killed me. I was speechless." For *2Pacalypse Now,* Tupac had worked with other producers in the Digital Underground family because Shock had been so busy trying to launch his own group. But now things were different. It was time for him to step in. Shock sent him a tape with two beats.

Tupac spent his twenty-first birthday on the set of *Poetic Justice*. Leading up to the big day, Atron planned to surprise Tupac with a brand-new black Jeep Cherokee. Since Tupac had the money for a down payment but no credit to finance it, Atron put the loan under his own name, picked it up from the dealership, and had Mopreme drive it to Seaside, California, where the movie was being shot on location that day. Completely surprised in front of the entire film crew, Tupac was thrilled, not just to have a great new ride but to finally give up the keys to the old, worn-down Celica he'd been driving courtesy of Man-Man. "He was happy that day," Atron remembered. "Good thing he didn't go over a cliff, 'cause he couldn't drive very well. But I think either Mo or Mouse might have been driving the car most of the time then anyway."

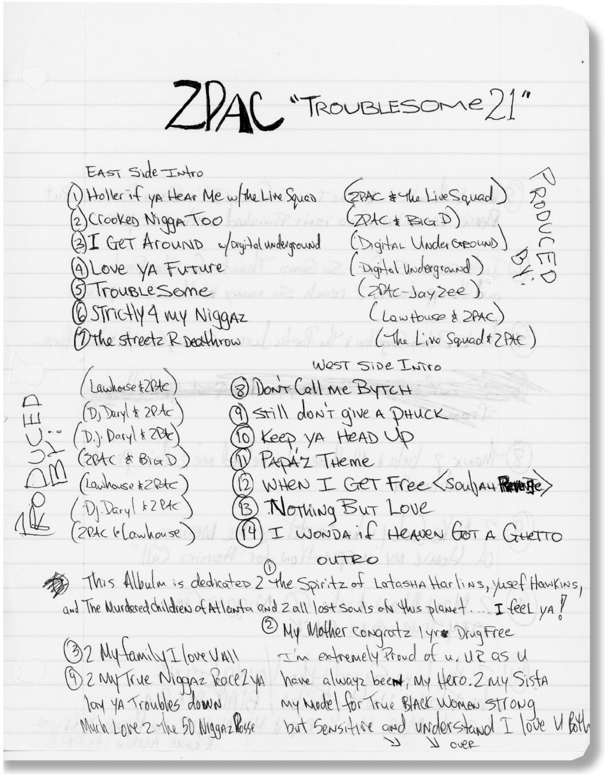
With each passing month, Tupac could point to a new milestone in sales reached or movie roles landed, and with it all came the money that would let him finally escape the poverty that had haunted him his whole life. What Karen Lee remembered from Tupac's birthday was his shock and surprise that he was still alive. "I remember his twenty-first birthday…. And how surprised he was that he made it to twenty-one. So often we talked about it, and I would tell him, 'You have got to stop this death thing.' "

—

The wrap party for *Poetic Justice* was bittersweet, largely because of conflict that had arisen between Tupac and Janet over the video for "If My Homie Calls." A representative of Janet's had called Atron asking for Janet to be removed from a few scenes, feeling she was in it "too much." Tupac was furious, and responded by cutting her from the video entirely. At the party, he and Janet saw each other, but according to friends, they maintained their distance. Instead, Tupac spent his time congregating with other celebrity guests. Ice Cube was there. Michael Rapaport too.

That night Tupac also met rap artist Snoop Dogg. "I had seen him in the movie *Juice,* and I told him how I thought it was dope and how I liked how he got down," recalled Snoop. "He said the same kind of thing back to me, so we rolled a blunt and smoke a bleazy outside. When we went back in the party, John Singleton had me get on the microphone. I did a little freestyle and Pac got on too. After we did that, we exchanged numbers. We just connected. Everything he liked, I liked. We were like brothers."

With the movie wrapped, and a bit of extra money in his pocket, Tupac had the freedom to commute back and forth from Los Angeles to the Bay Area to work with Oakland-based producers as he started to record his sophomore album, at first titled *Black Starry Night* and then *Troublesome 21*. During these six-hour road trips from Los Angeles in his new Jeep Cherokee, he often tortured everyone with his music choices. "Half of the drive we'd be listening to *Les Misérables* or Sting," Mopreme remembers. Everyone in the car would wait until Tupac went to sleep so they could change the music. Unfortunately for them, Tupac rarely slept and the *Les Misérables* cassette tape got repeated spins. Tupac ignored their complaints. “This is my shit right here, man.”



2PAC "TROUBLESOME 21"

EAST Side Intro
① Holler if ya Hear Me w/the Live Squad (2PAC & the Live Squad)
② Crooked Nigga Too (2PAC & BIG D)
③ I GeT Around w/digital underground (Digital UnderGROUND)
④ Love ya Future (Digital Underground)
⑤ TroubleSome (2PAC-JayZee)
⑥ Strictly 4 my Niggaz (Lawhouse & 2PAC)
⑦ the streetz R deathrow (The Live Squad & 2PAC)

PRODUCED BY:

WEST SIDE INTRO
⑧ Don't Call me BYTCH (Lawhouse & 2PAc)
⑨ still don't give a PHUCK (Dj Daryl & 2PAc)
⑩ Keep ya HEAD Up (D.J. Daryl & 2PAc)
⑪ PAPA'Z Theme (2PAC & BIG D)
⑫ WHEN I GET Free <Souljah Revenge> (Lawhouse & 2PAc)
⑬ Nothing But Love (Dj. Daryl & 2PAc)
⑭ I WONDA if HEAVEN GOT A GHETTO (2PAC & Lawhouse)
OUTRO

① This Album is dedicated 2 the Spiritz of Latasha Harlins, yusef Hawkins, and The Murdered children of Atlanta and 2 all lost Souls on this planet.... I feel ya!

② My Mother congratz 1 yr Drug Free I'm extremely Proud of u. U R as u have alwayz been, My Hero. 2 my Sista my Model for True BLACK Women strong but Sensitive and understand I love U Both

③ 2 My family I love U All

④ 2 My True Niggaz Race 2 ya lay ya Troubles down Much Love 2 the 50 Niggaz Posse

over

Handwritten track list for Tupac’s album *Troublesome 21,* which later became *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*

Click here to view as text

One of the songs Tupac was eager to work on in the studio featured a beat from the cassette that Shock sent to him after their *Billboard* charts conversation. Shock recalled Tupac saying that when he popped the cassette into his stereo and turned up the volume, it was exactly the type of beat he’d hoped for. “Yeah, this is it!” Tupac exclaimed through the phone to Shock. “The first beat here on this tape, I want it. Yeah, I wanna fuck with that one. I haven’t even heard the rest of it yet. I just heard one bar of it and I turned it off to call you…. Yeah, that’s the one.”

Upon arriving at the studio to record, Tupac informed Shock that he only had a few hours before he had to fly back to Los Angeles. Shock wasn’t up for a rushed recording session, so he told Tupac to record his vocals, and he would do his the following day. Money-B would also record his verse at a later date. “Naw,” Tupac balked, shaking his head. “We need to put somethin’ on this now.”

“Man, I’m dusted,” Shock complained. “I have been in the studio all week.”

Tupac ignored his complaint and picked up his notebook and started to scribble. A few minutes later he shoved a page at Shock. “Here, say this.”

Shock stared down at the words on the paper:

Just ’cause I’m a freak don’t mean that we could hit the sheets
Baby, I can see that you don’t recognize me
I’m Shock G, the one who put the satin on your panties

Shock liked it. He nodded. “All right,” he told Tupac, “this is cool.” The lyric Tupac had scribbled for Shock in haste would become legendary for the man who rapped it.

“Yeah, Tupac was the one to bless me with my infamous ‘satin on the panties’ line,” Shock said. “And I’m known for that line.”

Tupac went into the sound booth first. Headphones on, he listened to the beat. Shock sat at the mixing board. “Okay, this is how I want the chorus to go,” Tupac directed. He sang into the microphone, “Round and round, here we go.” Shock was unsure about it at first, but when Tupac said, “Put that Shock G shit on it,” Shock wrote a quick melody and played it back on the piano. Everyone loved it. Within hours, the two had recorded their verses for “I Get Around,” and Tupac was out the door and on his way to the airport.

—

With the movies a growing part of his life and career, and Los Angeles’s increasing centrality in the exploding world of hip-hop, Tupac could have cut his ties to the Bay Area and moved permanently south. But he didn’t. He kept his apartment in Oakland and continued to travel back and forth. He wasn't ready to leave the place where, he once said, he had "learned the game." Years later, his Oakland loyalty remained strong. "I give all my love to Oakland," he said in an interview. "If I'm gonna claim a city, I'm gonna claim Oakland." He knew his working relationships in Northern California were important, and the collaborations were producing hits for his second record. Yet one of these trips back home would wind up casting a much darker, painful shadow on the future.

On August 22, 1992, Tupac jumped in his Jeep to caravan with his crew—Man-Man, Mike Cooley, Katari, Malcolm, Mouse (who had moved out from Baltimore), and Mopreme—to the annual Marin City Music Festival. Tupac planned to enjoy the afternoon with some of his old friends from Marin City and then head into San Francisco to Ray Luv's debut record release party. On the drive over, he expressed a desire to share his success with friends in his old neighborhood and the kids in the community who looked up to him. He thought they'd be happy to see that if you worked hard, you could achieve your goals and dreams.

His trips back across the bay to check on his friends in Marin City had become few and far between, mostly because of his packed schedule due to his growing career. And eventually, his "big mouth," as he often called it, did damage to his reputation there. During an interview, he had gutted the community in one sentence, as he uttered insults and generalizations about Marin City's residents. The comment had wounded the pride of an entire town, causing many who lived there to fume.

Word traveled across the bay to Tupac that they weren't at all happy with his sentiments, with some warning that he should stay away. Tupac didn't believe it. "We got word that they were a little frustrated about what Tupac had to say," Man-Man remembered. "He wasn't worried about it, though." Tupac thought everything would be fine once he got to the festival; those in the community who were upset about his public dis would let bygones be bygones.

The event was a Saturday-afternoon family affair, with live music filling the air and a carefree weekend atmosphere. Guests stretched out on blankets, sipping wine and soaking up the bay air and sunshine. Several local bands, including his old crew, One Nation Emcees, who had changed their name to 51.50, were slated to perform before headliners Frankie Beverly and Maze closed out the day.

Tupac was right about the kids. As soon as he stepped from his Jeep, a group of excited youngsters greeted him. In their eyes, Tupac had transformed from the “poor” guy who used to rap on the Front to a bona fide celebrity. They shoved pens and pieces of paper at him and asked for his autograph.

But he was wrong about the bygones. Ant Dog explained, “Marin City didn’t hate him, just a *couple* people hated him.” Those who still carried resentment for him confronted Tupac that day. They felt he’d offended their community and had no right to be there. Man-Man reflected, “He didn’t go out there to intentionally start something. He had gone to give back to the community that watched him and helped him before. We didn’t go out there for trouble.”

Tupac felt threatened by the confrontation, and the argument escalated into a fight. One of the men punched Tupac in the face. But what happened next would have awful consequences and would remain a matter of dispute for years to come.

In the midst of the scuffle, a gunshot rang out. Chaos followed. Tupac and his friends ran toward the fence that separated the festival from the parking area, hoping to jump it and get to their cars. But Katari, who was on crutches with a broken leg, fell behind, and Malcolm recalled having to run back for him. He remembered seeing what looked like the whole crowd chasing them and wondered why so many people would be involved in what had started as a small beef.

When they got to their cars, Tupac jumped in the passenger seat of the Jeep and slammed the door, but someone smashed the window, reached through, and tried to pull him out of the car. Tupac crawled into the back seat to lie across Katari and Malcolm, shielding them from the flying glass.

While this was happening, the county sheriffs were informed of the reason the crowd had become enraged: a bullet that was fired had struck and killed a young boy who was riding his bicycle around the festival. Green-and-white Marin County Sheriff cars raced toward Tupac's Jeep and blockaded the exit. The sheriffs drew their guns on the car and ordered Tupac and the others to get out and get down on the ground as angry Marin City residents threw bottles and rocks.

One by one, everyone in the car was cuffed, thrown into the back of the police cars, and taken to the nearby jail. All were detained and questioned in the fatal shooting of six-year-old Qa'id Walker-Teal, but eventually released without criminal charges.

When Tupac learned of Qa'id's death, he was shattered, and horrified that he was being associated with the accidental death of a child. He'd just started his crusade, his mission to improve the lives of others, primarily young Black males. It became his focus, as he vowed to *listen* to them, *hear* them, and *be there* for them in the absence of all those who had failed them. In searching for a way to protect them, he willingly assumed the role of a big brother, and in his lyrics and public appearances, he started to call out those who ignored the youth, confronting the adults for not protecting them. And then, in the midst of setting off this grand vision to activate change and bring hope to Black communities, Tupac was faced with this devasting event, the death of a young Black boy. Qa'id Walker-Teal, who represented the future generations Tupac wanted to shield from poverty and violence, was gone. The incident broke his spirit and forever changed him. Malcolm recounted, "Tupac was deeply affected. He was never able to resolve it within himself. He never really recovered from that incident."

Soon, those close to Tupac urged him to leave the Bay Area. They'd heard there was a price on his head. Tupac packed up his Oakland apartment, put everything he had in the back of the Jeep, and moved his life to Los Angeles.

PART IV

LOS ANGELES

15

SOULJAH'S REVENGE

1992

> My message to the censorship committee—
> who's the biggest gang of niggas in the city?
> The critics or the cops?
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

In August of '92, the presidential race in America started heating up as Tupac settled into his Los Angeles home. As the race grew tighter, and President George H. W. Bush felt the squeeze from billionaire businessman Ross Perot and Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, the already heated questions of race, crime, and policing that had been thrust to the fore by racial unrest throughout the country continued to intersect with the subject of rap lyrics. In speeches that year, Vice President Dan Quayle emphasized the importance of family values and blamed high crime rates on the rap-music industry, especially artists like Ice-T, whose lyrics expressed anti-police sentiments.

It was the culmination of a long summer of public outcry. The pressure on record labels had grown intense. Questions began swirling in Time Warner's boardroom about what might be done to rein in their artists and mollify critics. At first, Tom Whalley and Ted Field held their ground, proud to support artists and their right to express themselves free of this kind of censorship. But Interscope was an independent company, distributed by Atlantic Records, and Atlantic was a division of Time Warner. And while they resisted the pressure for a while, they ultimately had to align with Atlantic's parent company.

Atron remembers the final clampdown delivered during a meeting led by Mo Ostin, head of Warner Bros. music. Atron was there, as were artists Ice-T and both members of Live Squad, Tupac's friend Stretch and his brother Majesty. Ostin explained that Warner had to consider its shareholders first and foremost. And so, he told them, going forward, the company would not distribute any records containing lyrics with themes of violence against police. Plus, any label or artist under the Time Warner umbrella would have to submit all lyrical content for approval before the product was released to market. Ostin told the artists that he respected their work, but the company just couldn't take the risk.

Ultimately, Ice-T, whose "Cop Killer" was at the center of the controversy, took matters into his own hands. He decided to pull "Cop Killer" off the shelves and continued to maintain that the song was his "protest record" and that he was just "misunderstood." He explained in a press conference that the song is "not a call to murder police. This song is about anger and the community and how people get that way."

Tupac's first album, *2Pacalypse Now,* would not be withdrawn, but the new dictum would directly affect songs Tupac had already recorded for his new album, still tentatively called *Troublesome 21.* Tom and Atron had to inform him that the album would have to be rethought, and some songs would need to be rerecorded.

At first, Tupac was furious, but he finally agreed to rethink a couple of songs. He even made light of it one afternoon in a studio session that was being recorded on video around this time. He sat with Stretch, producer Big D, Mopreme, and "one of the best musicians in the entire world, my man Bush—no relation to George Bush." Tupac held up the proposed artwork for the *Troublesome* album and said, "Check it out—this was the cover for the album, for *Troublesome,* but guess what? Time Warner said get it out of here!" Tupac's friends in the studio followed in chorus, "GET IT OUT OF HERE!"

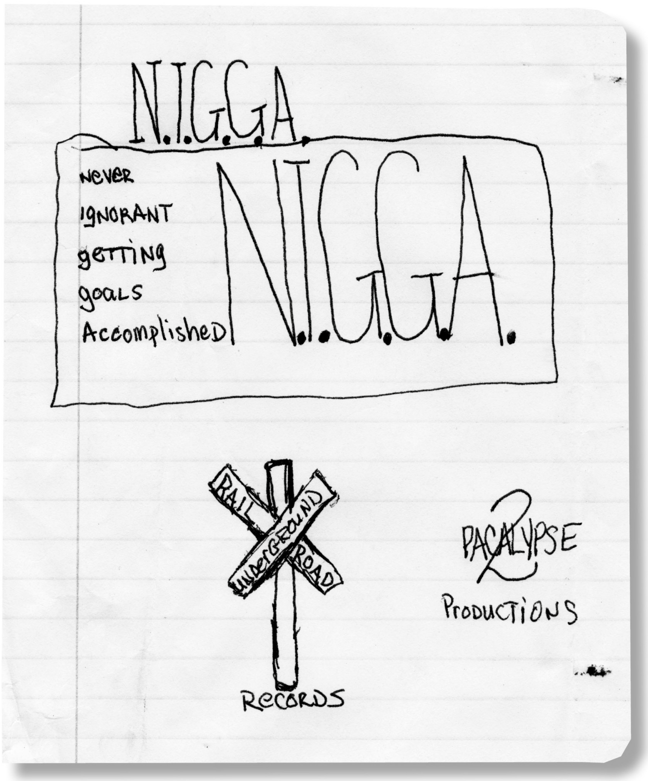
Interscope chose to support Tupac in any way it could, including by writing a check to cover the new costs. And yet even as Tupac made the tweaks Warner requested, he refused to accept the argument that his rap lyrics or his performance in *Juice* promoted violence. "All that Iran–Contra stuff, that war, that's violence to me. That's real violence," he told an interviewer that year. "What we're rappin', it happens in the streets….What we're doin' is using our brain to get out of the ghetto any way we can, so we tell these stories and they tend to be violent because our world tends to be filled with violence."

Ice-T's withdrawal of "Cop Killer" from Body Count's record ended up providing Time Warner with little relief from the public outcry. By September of that year, spurred by Ronald Ray Howard's defense claims that Tupac's music had played a role in his crime, Vice President Quayle had shifted his target from Ice-T to Tupac.

In the "Campaign Trail" section of the September 23 issue of *The New York Times,* the headlines read: "On Quayle's List: A Rapper and a Record Company." The article reported on comments Quayle had made when he met with the daughter of slain highway patrolman Bill Davidson in Houston, in which he accused Interscope and Time Warner of committing "an irresponsible corporate act" by promoting and distributing *2Pacalypse Now*. "There is absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published by a responsible corporation," said Quayle. "I am suggesting that Time Warner's subsidiary Interscope Records withdraw this record. It has no place in our society."

Congressional agitation was one thing. The sitting vice president calling the company on the carpet was another. Interscope's publicist Lori Earl remembers, "As soon as he [Tupac] started drawing the ire of politicians, then of course that flagged Time Warner. And so I was in between those two, telling Time Warner to calm down and also trying to explain him to them. And to their credit, they backed him up. They paid for lawyers to come in and help him."

It was in many ways a dark and frustrating time, personally and professionally. The tragic death of young Qa'id Walker-Teal in Marin City continued to weigh heavily on Tupac's mind, and now Quayle's public broadside and the restrictions from Time Warner meant that he would have to compromise his art, the very essence of his self-expression. He had said publicly that his lyrics were written solely as a reaction to an unjust society: "In my music and a lot of this music it's only talking about the oppressed rising up against the oppressor—so the only people that's scared are the oppressors. The only people who have any harm coming to them are those who oppress.” But now with these restrictions always in the back of his mind while he wrote in his notebooks, he felt frustrated that he could no longer be an unfiltered voice for those who felt forgotten, those who were consistently abused and harassed by the police. Now he could no longer fully express himself in the raw and uncut way he wanted to—without the white man’s approval.


N.I.G.G.A.
Never
Ignorant
Getting
Goals
Accomplished
N.I.G.G.A.
Rail
Underground
Road
Records
Pacalypse 2
Productions

Tupac liked to create “backronyms.” He took the word “N.I.G.G.A.,” a term with historically negative connotations, and flipped it into one that is positive and empowering.

Click here to view as text

When it came to race in America, the temperature continued to rise. The verdict in the Latasha Harlins trial, upheld by a judge that summer, was widely seen by Black America as another failure of the justice system, with Harlins’s killer receiving probation, community service, and a $500 fine. Tupac was infuriated by this outcome. He sympathized with the pain of the victim and of her family, and channeled this anger and sadness into his music and lyrics of several of his songs. One of them, a track that he recorded that year with producer DJ Daryl called "Keep Ya Head Up," would become one of Tupac's most beloved hits. He dedicated the song to Harlins.

It was time to unify—to band together with his brothers and sisters and lead. Using his musical platform to tell the story of oppression in America was only part of the plan. He also believed that it was imperative to initiate a movement, a nationwide effort to empower Black communities. He decided to call this initiative "50 N.I.G.G.A.Z.," using his backronym—Never Ignorant, Getting Goals Accomplished. The number 50 represented the states of the country.

Tupac's 50 N.I.G.G.A.Z. mission sprang from his belief that if he could recruit one "soldier," one Black man in every state, to stand up and assume a leadership role, to become an ambassador within his community, together they could address inequities, institute agendas, and start to see progress toward an equal and fair society.

Since a handful of the songs off his second album needed to be replaced, Tupac decided to rename the album as well, folding a theme of loyalty into the branding of his unification campaign. *Troublesome 21* became *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*

For further proof of his commitment, Tupac called on tattoo artist Dennis "Dago" Coelho, who had done the first two tattoos on his chest, one of the royal Egyptian Nefertiti, a symbol of feminine power and beauty, and one of his stage name "2Pac," expanded with another backronym that he'd come up with the year before, "2 Produce and Create." He now asked Coelho to tattoo the name of his new movement on his stomach, asking for an image of an AK-47 rifle to be tattooed beneath it. The logo's original intent was to symbolize the idea that with one man in each state across the country leading the Black nation, they'd be stronger than the power of any gun.

But days later, Tupac moved away from 50 N.I.G.G.A.Z. He thought of a new angle, a revamped slogan for his movement, one that would instead be called “T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E.” His plan was to embrace people whom America labeled as “thugs” and flip the negative connotation of the word just as some in the Black community had reclaimed “nigger” by altering the spelling to “nigga.” He would turn the negative implication to one of belonging and pride.

Thug Life represented the next stage of evolution in Tupac’s lifelong activism. He was determined to give hope and help to those who stood strong but who didn’t have an equal shot at the most basic opportunities, those who found themselves stuck in the aftershock of over 246 years of slavery. Those who were consistently discriminated against because of the color of their skin.

Many would accuse Tupac of glorifying a violent life. But he didn’t care. To him, it was a form of legitimization that would invoke feelings of inclusion and inspiration. The point was to make people feel seen, heard, and accepted. “When I say ‘I live the Thug Life, Baby, I’m hopeless,’ one person might hear that and just like the way it sounds, but I’m doing it for the kid that really lives a thug life and feels like it’s hopeless,” he explained.

But it was hard for Tupac to get even some of his closest confidants to see it his way.

Tupac called on Jamal Joseph, in New York, for his guidance. Since his days as Afeni’s Panther 21 comrade and then as Tupac’s sensei and one of his godfathers, Jamal had become embroiled in the efforts of the Black Liberation Army, which ultimately led to him serving five and a half years of a twelve-and-a-half-year sentence at Leavenworth Penitentiary for harboring a fugitive. Upon his release in 1987, after earning three degrees while in prison, he found a job at Touro University in New York, eventually becoming a professor at Columbia University. As Tupac got older, Jamal was someone he went to for advice.

Jamal expressed his doubts. He stood proudly by his Black Panther heritage and the tenets of the organization, its pride and loyalty, and he struggled to understand why Tupac would choose a word like “thug,” with such negative connotations, to represent his plan. Jamal worried it might be misconstrued by the broader population, that it would hinder rather than help Tupac build his movement.

"Tupac, what's the deal with Thug Life?" Jamal asked. "You are the son of a Panther. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were thugs and they became revolutionaries. Malcolm X was a thug who became a revolutionary. So you were born a revolutionary, why are you stepping backwards?"

Tupac was quick with his response: "It's about meeting the kids where they're at and articulating that pain and then focusing on something positive." He further explained, "I gotta keep it real with the niggas who kept it real with me. They're the ones who showed me love. They're the ones who took care of me." Tupac felt that the so-called thugs and dealers were the only group of people, besides his family, who had given him unconditional love and provided a sense of confidence and security in the past. Legs was the first. Then there were the brothas in the neighborhood in Baltimore. And then hustlers in the Bay Area, Mike Cooley and Man-Man. These unintended role models had become those with whom Tupac identified most.

When he called Mutulu to talk about his plans, Mutulu told him he had to "define it." He also made sure to give Tupac a history of the word "thug," tracing its Hindi origins (from *thag,* meaning "thief" or "con man") and its connection to groups of professional assassins in 1930s India. The thugs would befriend groups of travelers and then murder them and steal their valuables. As the British colonial powers tried to stamp out these violent assassins, "thuggery" became a word that encompassed all things violent in their society. Mutulu also reminded Tupac that the Shakurs had enemies in the government, which made him a target. Boldly proclaiming a slogan that on its face could be seen as glorifying violence could possibly draw unwanted attention from the authorities.

To help Tupac further define his mission, Mutulu suggested that he incorporate a doctrine of codes, a formalized set of rules for the street to help address what he termed "horizontal aggression." The code included such orders as: No carjacking. No slinging in schools. No abusing old folks.

"Senseless brutality and rape must stop." "Harm to children will not be forgiven."

Tupac explained, "I think even gangs can be positive. It just has to be organized. And has to steer away from being self-destructive to being self-productive." The final proclamation of the Thug Life code: "In unity, there is strength."

In an effort to symbolize his dedication to his new Thug Life movement, Tupac decided he needed another tattoo from Coelho. "It had to have meaning, and had to be something nobody else had," Coelho recalled of Tupac's thought process. This time Tupac left the studio with the words "THUG LIFE" inked in three-inch-high block letters. The "I" was a bullet.

Tupac envisioned Thug Life as much more than a slogan; he wanted to build it into an organized operation similar to the Black Panther movement. Like the Black men and women of the '60s who found solace in Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale's leadership philosophy, Tupac felt the thugs of the '90s were also disenfranchised by society. Tupac wanted people in this community to feel heard and understood. It was imperative to him that they knew he saw their struggle.

Tupac needed to assemble the right team to help him support and build his movement. First, he asked the person he'd been most inspired by throughout his life—his mother. The first year after completing her recovery, Afeni had moved back in with her sister, Jean. Tupac was immensely proud of her and thought that working together would help repair the parts of their relationship that had been strained by her drug use. Without hesitation, Afeni accepted her son's suggestion to come to Los Angeles and start working with him. She would be responsible for managing all community-outreach programs, fundraising, and overseeing other charitable efforts. To initially fund these efforts, he would use any extra money he had left from his film and music projects, starting with the $200,000 he had just earned from *Poetic Justice.*

Tupac's next order of business was to make sure the people helping him develop his career were dedicated solely to him and his vision. Atron had seen his potential from the start, but Tupac was still just one of his artists, on a roster full of them, vying for his time and attention. Tupac felt he needed a manager who could devote 100 percent of his time to him. One day after Atron picked Tupac up from LAX and headed north on Interstate 405, Tupac told him that he didn't want to share him with Digital Underground or with any of his other artists. Atron remembered Tupac's words: "I'm gonna be the best, period. And if you can't work with just me, I have to go work with someone who will. I need to be the most important to you, and if you don't want to do it this way, I gotta move on."

Atron wished he could have figured out a way to keep Tupac on his client roster, but he was still managing Digital Underground, female rap artist MC Smooth, a number of music producers, and the group Gold Money. By then his management firm had grown to encompass fully staffed offices in Northern and Southern California. He completely understood Tupac's concern and desire to have a one-to-one relationship with his manager, but he couldn't just cut everyone else off. "So he called Watani, who he trusted," recalled Atron.

In the following weeks and months, though, Atron soon learned that he was in no way out of the inner circle. Not only would Tupac continue to call him with questions and sometimes frustration, but Watani, too, would occasionally call and ask for Atron's advice.

Tupac and Watani already had a solid relationship, cultivated during Tupac's short time as chairman of the New Afrikan Panthers. Now it would take on a new dimension. Tupac and Afeni decided that Watani would be a good fit to handle *all* management functions going forward. It didn't matter that Watani had no experience in the record or film industries. They were confident he could handle the job. And since Karen Lee had informed Tupac that she was moving on to take a job with Prince at Paisley Park, Watani brought in Talibah Mbonisi, an associate from the New Afrikan Panthers. Tupac had already met her the previous year and quickly grew to appreciate her strength and willingness to challenge him. Tupac was confident that she would be able to manage public relations and keep his "big mouth" in check.

Like Mutulu and Jamal, Watani worried about Tupac inviting more controversy and confusion with his Thug Life crusade. As his new manager, Watani hoped to guide Tupac with his messaging. He suggested using the word “outlaw” instead of “thug.” But Tupac could not be swayed. So Watani, like Mutulu, urged him to define his mission, to create a moral underpinning that could hold up the positive ideas behind Thug Life to counter those who would be quick to criticize it.

The moral and the mission soon became clearer: Tupac wanted to reach individuals ignored by society—young Black men who were forced to raise themselves without any role models or direction, creating an adverse cycle that affected the entire urban community. He wanted to spread the values that Afeni had instilled in him, to use the tenets of the Black Panther Party to empower them, filling their spirits with Black pride. He wanted to make them understand that despite the oppression their ancestors had endured, it was their strength and resilience—passed down for centuries from generation to generation—that would serve as a foundation as they continued to face oppression and adversity. Tupac knew, because Afeni had taught him, that Black people needed to embrace this resilience, take pride in it. The unity forged by it would encourage self-worth.

He also planned to let the rest of society know that it was this very oppression, this *hate,* that stunted the growth of young Black men and limited their true potential. That time would come soon after, on a night when Watani arranged for Tupac to speak at a dinner in Atlanta for the Malcolm X Grass Roots Movement. Standing in front of a packed ballroom, Tupac spoke about his mother, the Black Panther movement, and the importance of parental education. He praised Afeni for staying home to teach him instead of continuing her fight in the struggle.

As he turned to the ongoing inequities plaguing society and his inability to ignore them, his conviction increased. He told the crowd that this was a critical moment for him. He was being given the opportunity to let them know all that remained heavy on his heart. His words became increasingly animated, almost tripping over one another as he called on the community to make change. How was it, he asked the audience, that there were colleges across America, and yet there were still "niggas" that were "trapped," and still "Brendas" who were having babies before their time. He candidly discussed the weight of the responsibility he was feeling to lead, saying, "It hurts that—no, it bothers me, not hurts—that I have to sidestep my youth to stand up and do some shit that somebody else is supposed to be doing. It's too many men out here for me to be doing this. 'Cause it ain't my turn yet. I'm supposed to be following behind him to get the knowledge."

As he brought his speech to a crescendo, he revealed a deeper meaning of his new slogan, "Thug Life." "We're gonna be what you put into it. So if you don't put shit into it, don't be mad when it blows up," he told the crowd.

Tupac believed that when young Black children grew up on the receiving end of hate, which in his conception included neglect and oppression and racism from society, the whole world would suffer the consequences. In another interview, he explained the backronym he attached to his new movement. "T. H. U. G. L. I. F. E. The. Hate. U. Gave. Little. Infants. F-u-c-k. Everybody. Meaning, what you feed us as seeds, grows and blows up in your face," he explained. "That's Thug Life."

Watani agreed to help Tupac shape his movement. But if Tupac was going to reach out and represent the street demographic, Watani wanted to make sure he understood Los Angeles street mentality, the neighborhoods, and especially the landscape of the Los Angeles gang territories. The 1980s and '90s had seen the growth of a heavy gang presence in South Central L.A., with peaking drug sales and drive-by shootings. It was starkly different from what Tupac had glimpsed in Marin City and Oakland.

Watani knew members of both the Crips and the Bloods, which would help tremendously with Tupac's interest to form a coalition, a place where gang lines were blurred and Black men, regardless of gang affiliation, could join forces. He believed that if everyone came together, they'd present the strongest opposition to what he considered the most oppressive "gang" in America: the white power structure embodied by politics and law enforcement. "This country was built on gangs…Republicans. Democrats.

The police department, the FBI, the CIA," Tupac said in an interview. "Those are gangs." He said, "America *is* Thug Life."

Watani arranged a meeting between Tupac and Anthony "Serge" Bryant, whom Watani thought might help oversee Tupac's adjustment to life in L.A. beyond the lights of Hollywood movie sets. Serge took Tupac to Echo Sound Studios in Atwater Village. He also introduced him to friends from his neighborhood in Inglewood, a city in Los Angeles County just southwest of Los Angeles proper.

One of those friends was Tyruss "Big Syke" Himes, a rap artist who was recording his debut album. Just a couple of years older than Tupac, Syke had had a very different upbringing. Seasoned by a life on the streets of Inglewood, Syke epitomized the demographic that Tupac was trying to reach, and the two quickly grew close. "He took to me 'cause I was a real street cat just trying to get out of the streets doin' my little independent thing," Syke recalled. The two traded ideas and strategies for how to sell their records while simultaneously trying to motivate young Black men from neighborhoods around South Central Los Angeles to come together and mend their differences. Tupac shared his plans for the Thug Life movement and his intention to make a companion record with the same name. As he envisioned it, his *Thug Life* album would be filled with lived realities reflecting the experience of young Black men on the streets. "When he said Thug Life, it was self-explanatory," Syke remembered, "and it was something I knew I wanted to be a part of. He helped me find myself."

Over the course of frequent visits to Syke in the Imperial Village section of Inglewood, Tupac eventually met his friends Mental Illness, a rapper, and Big Kato, who acted as a financial backer for Syke, just as Mike Cooley and Man-Man had for Tupac. Kato funded studio time for Syke's group Evil Mind Gangsta's to record their album *All Hell Breakin' Loose.*

"That was Pac's introduction to the street," Watani said. "And then he began to change and his art started reflecting that. And he told me, 'I want to make sure that I don't exclude that element. I want to make sure they don't think I just left them and that I can't identify with them.' And so he was doing a balancing act. He felt pressure because he had to prove himself to the streets because he ain't from the streets."

—

Around this time, the Hughes brothers, Allen and Albert, who had directed Tupac's first two music videos, contacted him about a role in their debut feature film, tentatively called *Menace II Society*. The brothers had lined up a distribution deal for the film with New Line Cinema, but the deal was contingent on attracting a platinum recording artist to fill one of the roles.

Allen Hughes pitched him on the film: a raw, honest glimpse into street life in South Central L.A. Hughes thought Tupac would be a good fit for the supporting role of Sharif, a young Muslim whose attempts to redirect the violent life of his friend Caine, the film's main character, end in tragedy. Tupac was on board right away, but before he accepted the offer, he wanted to make sure that Allen understood that for the Hughes brothers, he could only take a supporting role; his lead roles were reserved for John Singleton. "I'll do *Menace,*" he said, "but me and John Singleton, we're like De Niro and Scorsese. I'm only fuckin' with him from now on as far as my leading roles. So I'll do a supporting role, a side role for you guys." Even with that brash stipulation, after contracts were signed, Tupac would stand to make $300,000 for the three-week shoot.

As the Hughes brothers cast the rest of the film, Tupac instantly thought of Jada Pinkett. They'd been wanting to work together for years, and Tupac asked Allen Hughes to consider her for a role. "Tupac was a part of *Menace II Society* first," Jada explained. "And he was the one who put me on. He was the one who called the Hughes brothers and was like, 'You gotta meet my homegirl, Jada.' He called me and was like, 'I'm part of this movie. I really think you'd be great for this role.' [So] I went and I met them. We clicked and so I got the role." The moment would mark Tupac and Jada's first creative project since their years at Baltimore School for the Arts. It would also be a chance for Tupac to work with Bill Duke, who would be cast as a detective, giving him a chance to get to know Duke even better and perhaps redeem himself for his no-show at the *Deep Cover* premiere the year before.

On the first day of table reads, Tupac arrived at the film's production offices. He was excited to start work on the film, but even more thrilled to see Jada in the building. "When Tupac came in the first day he literally ran over to Jada," Allen remembered. "He took her and [practically] threw her in the air and caught her on the other side of the room and they hugged. They were like brother and sister."

Nothing else that day went according to plan.

As Tupac read the script, there seemed to be a growing void between the Hughes brothers' vision for his character on the page and what he believed the character should be. According to other cast members there that day, every time it was Tupac's turn to read, he'd pause, look at the script in front of him, and just sigh. Then he'd pause again and take a sip of water out of his glass on the table. Then he'd sigh again. He cracked jokes throughout the table read. Sometimes the cast would laugh, whether out of nervousness or genuine amusement. Sometimes Tupac would laugh too.

Hughes never laughed. It wasn't funny. He expected Tupac to be professional, not the entertainment for his cast. But behind Tupac's attitude seemed to be a frustration with his supporting role, which he wanted to have more depth. Larenz Tate, who played O-Dog in the film, recalled, "Tupac had an issue with some of the script and the dialogue and how the character was going to be portrayed….He was responsible enough to say, 'Listen, this is how I want this character to be portrayed.' "

Another castmate at the table read, rap artist Aaron Tyler, aka MC Eiht, remembered the specifics of Tupac's complaint: "He wanted them to write in the script *why* [his character] turned Muslim. Show why. The depiction of it was supposed to be his little brother had got killed, but they weren't gonna show all that, own all that….And that's what angered him….If you want me to play the righteous dude, you have to go and show why I turned righteous. And they didn't want to do it."

Hughes tried to rein Tupac in, but nothing could convince him to let go of his efforts to make creative additions and changes to the story line. He told everyone in the room “no disrespect to the cast,” but he couldn’t let go of what he felt was the right way to tell a story. And once Tupac believed in something, that was it. He was adamant, determined, and had a difficult time letting go of getting his way.

Later in the day, when the makeup artists came in to work on him, Tupac refused. Allen tried to calm him down, but Tupac’s erratic behavior continued. The next day, before Tupac arrived, Hughes asked the cast to refrain from laughing at Tupac’s wisecracks, hoping for a smoother second day, but Tupac continued to play the funny guy. He got out of his seat and continued to make jokes despite the silence from his castmates.

Eventually, Hughes couldn’t take it anymore. He looked at Tupac across the table and said, “Tupac, why are you acting like a bitch?” But this only escalated the situation. Eventually, Hughes called Tupac into his office in hopes of working things out privately. But Tupac was not in the mood to talk. “He said something to me that was confrontational,” Allen explained. “He was going nuts pacing back and forth in my office.”

Then he yelled, “Call my manager!” and stormed out of the building.

Even though Tupac had hired Watani, Atron was still involved in some of the day-to-day business, especially if it was related to a contract that he had been a part of negotiating. Tupac called Atron right away. “I’m not doing that movie. I quit!”

Atron immediately thought about the Mercedes that he’d just purchased for Tupac. “You can’t quit.”

“I quit. These muthafuckas can’t direct me!”

Hughes called Tupac that night, hoping to bury the hatchet and work something out. Tupac was having none of it. “Call my manager!” he said again, and he hung up the phone.

But Hughes had no plans to call Tupac’s manager. And days after Tupac stomped out of the *Menace II Society* production offices, he got wind that his chances for any reconciliation were zero. “Tupac was fired from *Menace* because there was a contract that stipulates that you gotta be there,” Allen Hughes recalled. “New Line Cinema got uncomfortable and he was relieved of his duties and another actor took the role.” But according to

Tupac, he never got an official notice of the firing and instead heard the news through an MTV entertainment news report. He was livid.

16

HOLLER IF YA HEAR ME

1993

> Whatever it takes to live and stand, ’cause nobody else’ll give a damn.
> So we live like caged beasts, waitin’ for the day to let the rage free.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

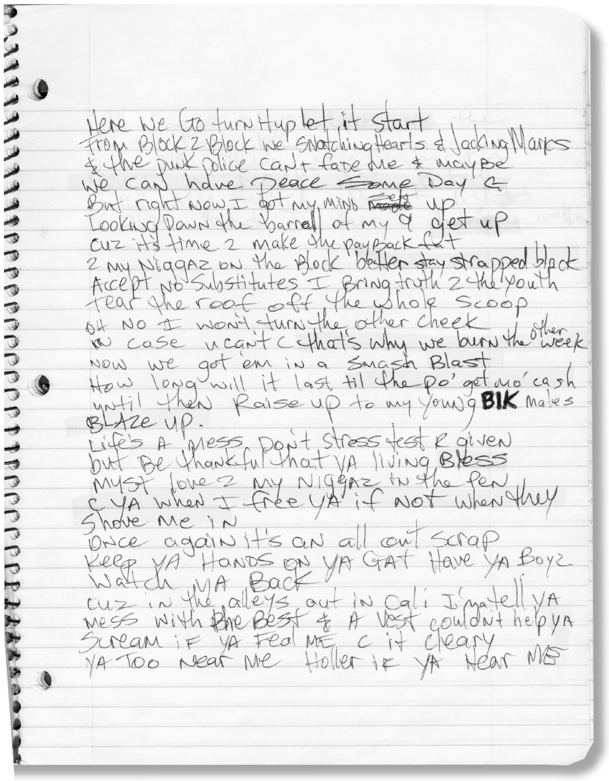
Tupac’s sophomore album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.,* was released on February 16, 1993, selling 38,000 in its first week and debuting at number 24 on the U.S. *Billboard* 200 and number 4 on the R&B/Hip Hop Albums chart. Though the album surpassed Bon Jovi, Paul McCartney, and Mary J. Blige on the *Billboard* 200, he had hoped to hit number 1. The first single, “Holler If Ya Hear Me,” produced by Stretch, carried an urgent request for America to act. To capture listeners’ attention with the album’s themes, Tupac opened the song’s music video with a spoken introduction, stating plainly his convictions:

> *Too many families have been affected by a wrongful death*
>
> *This system and this country has tore apart my family and our families*
>
> *You can’t have a Black family and be together*
>
> *How many more funerals do we gotta go to? And how many more scenes of the crime do we gotta watch them chalk out Black figures on the concrete before we realize that the only way for us to ever get out of this predicament is to struggle to survive?*
>
> *If we wanna change, we gotta fight for it. Ain’t nobody gonna give it to us. We just gonna have to take it.*

Of the many reasons Tupac was angry over his departure from *Menace II Society,* one was that he wouldn't get to work with Jada on the film. But soon a new opportunity presented itself, when Tupac was asked to make a guest appearance on her TV show, *A Different World*. Unlike the disastrous table read for *Menace,* this experience was wonderful. Jada recalled the show staff's excitement to work with Tupac. "I didn't have to lobby to get him on," she recalled. "I think it was a suggestion and everyone was like 'YES!' " The producers cast him as Piccolo, the ex-boyfriend of Jada's character, Lena. The writers worked the arc of Jada and Tupac's lifelong relationship into the dialogue between the two characters, when Piccolo says to Lena, "Maybe I'll be down to scoop you up later in life." Tupac and Jada even shared an onscreen kiss.

But offscreen, Tupac and Jada remained great friends and never became anything more. Tupac spoke of his deep platonic love for Jada in interviews, and even wrote a poem for her that was published posthumously. "Jada is my heart," he publicly proclaimed. "She will be my friend for my whole life. We'll be old together. She could have my one heart. My liver. My lungs. My kidneys. My blood. Marrow. All of that." Jada knew they had something special too. "The type of relationship we had," she reflected, "you only get that once in a lifetime."

On the set of *A Different World,* Jada introduced Tupac to Jasmine Guy, who portrayed the show's memorable character Whitley. Guy recalled the day they met: "I knew his music, but I hadn't paid that much attention to him until he walked on the set and I was like 'He's good!' " Tupac knew that Jasmine had been on the shows *Fame* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air,* and he was eager to befriend her and learn from her. He knew that having a friend with similar interests was just as important as having one whom he could exchange contacts and leads with. In the months that followed, he came to her for advice on how to build his acting résumé for television. One piece of advice she often gave him: "Don't let anyone tell you that you can't act or that you are riding on your rap career, because you really can. You're an actor!" In return, Tupac encouraged Jasmine's blossoming music career. He even told her that he hoped to sign her once he got his own record label.



Here we Go turn it up let it Start
From Block 2 Block we Snatching Hearts & Jacking Marks
& the punk police can't fade me & maybe
we can have Peace ~~Some~~ Day G
But right now I got my mind ~~made~~ set up
Looking Down the barrell of my 9 get up
cuz it's time 2 make the payback fat
2 my Niggaz on the Block better stay strapped black
Accept no Substitutes I Bring truth 2 the youth
tear the roof off the whole Scoop
oh no I won't turn the other cheek
in case u can't c that's why we burn the other week
now we got 'em in a Smash Blast
How long will it last til the po' get mo' cash
until then Raise up to my young BIK males
BLAZE UP.
Life's a mess Don't stress test R given
but Be thankful that YA living Bless
Must love 2 my Niggaz in the pen
c YA when I free YA if not when they
Shove me in
Once again it's an all out scrap
Keep YA HANDS on YA GAT Have YA Boyz
Watch YA Back
cuz in the alleys out in Cali I'ma tell YA
mess with the Best & A Vest couldn't help YA
Scream if YA Feel ME c it cleary
YA Too Near me Holler if YA Hear ME

Lyrics to “Holler If Ya Hear Me,” the opening track of his sophomore album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*

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Though Tupac was increasingly spending his time in the recording studio, he still took moments to reach out and cultivate friendships he had made during the Digital Underground tour. One afternoon, when he called Rosie Perez, the conversation started out casually, but as the call progressed, Rosie began to cry, explaining that she had just been stood up by her date fifteen minutes before she was supposed to leave for a night at the Soul Train Music Awards.

“Forget that! I’m on my way!” Tupac told her. “He’s gonna be so jealous seeing me with you.”

The two met up and took a limousine to the event. On the way, they smoked weed and talked about the night ahead. “I wasn’t a puffer back then," Rosie recalled, "to the point where we were in the limousine and I look at Pac and he looks at me, and I go 'Are we supposed to kiss or something?' And he says, 'No, because you're the type of girl that someone marries.' "

And though Tupac and Rosie's relationship would remain platonic, another romance was sparked that night. As Tupac and Rosie strolled down the aisle to their seats in the auditorium, Madonna pulled Rosie aside and said, "Hook me up!" Tupac was, of course, excited to hear that Madonna was inquiring. Within days, the two were officially dating.

It didn't matter that they came from drastically different backgrounds, or that she was more than ten years older than him, or that he was a rising star and she a world-famous pop icon. Inside the fame bubble, these differences could fade. While Tupac and Madonna did enjoy a romantic relationship for a short time, they also talked plenty about business. She shared her financial experiences and life lessons with him, teaching him the importance of saving and stretching his money. They talked about joining forces to start clothing lines and open restaurants, and even recorded a song together titled "I'd Rather Be Your Lover."

Snoop Dogg, who had grown closer to Tupac after they met at the *Poetic Justice* premiere, recounts a night that Tupac and Madonna showed up to meet him when he was on the set of *Saturday Night Live*. Tupac had reached Snoop on set by phone: "Wassup my nigga, where you at?"

"I'm at *Saturday Night Live*. I ain't got no dope."

Tupac jumped in to help. "Don't worry about a muthafuckin' thing, nigga. I'm coming to *Saturday Night Live*. I'll be there in a minute."

Snoop recalled the night years later in an interview with Howard Stern: "Guess who he pulls up with?…Madonna…And he comes in he's got a big bag of that 'do it fluid'…showing me that he was elevated in the game."

Madonna introduced Tupac to a life of wealth, privilege, and VIP status that was worlds away from his, and most people's, background. "Sometimes I'd drop him off at her house," Mopreme recalls. "One night in particular he was supposed to go somewhere with her on her jet and he was stressing me out because he was late. He had me speeding through the Valley trying to make this damn plane. But he missed it."

That spring, Tupac increasingly found his name in the newspapers not for record sales or film reviews, but for brushes with the law. On March 13, in Hollywood, Tupac and three of his friends were on their way to the set of *In Living Color* when they got into an altercation with the limo driver. The Associated Press article read, in part, "Two members of the rap group '2Pac' were arrested yesterday for allegedly assaulting a driver who complained they were using drugs in his limousine, police said…. The driver complained when the two sat in the car's front seat—a violation of the limousine company's policy—and allegedly used an illegal drug. 'They apparently got angry and pounced on him and beat and kicked and stomped him,' Police Sergeant John Zrofsky said." A month later, Tupac was arrested again, this time before a show in Lansing, Michigan, for swinging a baseball bat at local rapper Chauncey Wynn during a dispute over who was performing first.

Some close to Tupac saw him begin to go down a dangerous road. On the set of the music video for "I Get Around," which was slated to be released that summer as the second single off *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.,* Shock pulled Tupac aside. "Pac, listen. You gotta slow down. We're all worried." Tupac tried to shrug him off, but Shock stopped him. "Wait, listen," he said, dangling a key in front of Tupac. "If you wanna get away and just chill out, watch some TV and just relax, here's a key to my place. It's quiet and no one will know you are there."

"Shock, you don't understand," Tupac told him, thinking that since he'd surpassed the two goals he'd set for himself—to be on the big screen and put a record out—he was done. "I've done everything I set out to do already. At this point, I just don't give a fuck." The discussion was over.

With his endless appetite for new creative partnerships, combined with his unparalleled work ethic, Tupac was constantly expanding his world. One evening, after hearing the hit song "Indo Smoke," to be released on the *Poetic Justice* soundtrack, he made a few calls and ended up on the phone with the producer Warren G, the stepbrother of rap artist and producer Dr.

Dre, who was on a fast track to fame with the explosive success of his first solo album, *The Chronic.* Warren had been in a group called 213 with Snoop Dogg, his childhood friend, but when Dre and Snoop signed with Death Row, Warren was now open for new opportunities. He and Tupac agreed to meet at Echo Sound Studios. "I was living with my sister on Cedar Street, sleeping on her floor when he called her house," recalled Warren. "I grabbed my 'heat.'…I had a .45. I grabbed my little bag, wrapped up my mixer and my turntable, and jumped into my raggedy-ass Regal."

When Warren got to the studio, what started out as a catch-up quickly turned into a new song—"Definition of a Thug Nigga." "I walked into the studio and he started asking me what was up," Warren remembered. "I told him a lot of stuff I was going through, how I didn't have any money, and how I felt I was struggling just to get some money to eat, and how I was left for dead 'cause I wasn't with Snoop and Dre and Death Row, and how I felt down and out. I told him I was having shootouts in the hood with niggas and shit. Right after that he said, 'Warren, let me get a beat.' So I loaded my shit up and I played him one of my tracks. He grabbed a pad and started writing and bouncing and shit. He had a beanie on with a little string hangin' down and a blunt in his mouth, and then he started singing the hook from [what became] 'Definition of a Thug Nigga.' When he went in the vocal booth, he was talking about everything that I'd just told him."

As Warren and Tupac finished up the song, they received some tragic news: their good friend Big Kato had been murdered—killed for a set of $2,500 Dayton rims. "[Tupac] was kind of fucked up after that," Warren remembered. "Some girls came in the studio and everybody was fucked up and huggin' and shit."

While grieving, Tupac asked Warren if he had another beat. Within minutes, they had recorded a second song called "How Long Will They Mourn Me?" and dedicated it to Kato:

It's kinda hard to be optimistic
When your homie's lying dead on the pavement twisted

It would be another connection made around that time that led to some of Tupac's most legendary hits. Through Syke, he met a producer named Johnny Jackson, known to his friends as Johnny "J." He was a few years older than Tupac, a South Central native who had made waves producing the 1990 hit song "Knockin' Boots" for his high school friend John Shaffer, better known as Candyman.

"I was working on Big Syke's album," Johnny recalled. "And…he came to me and said 'J, Tupac wanna meet you. Tupac wanna hook up.' "

"Tupac? Are you serious?"

Syke was serious. "Homie heard the beats you did on my stuff. He wanna get with you."

Johnny remembers he didn't waste any time in heading out. "He shot me right to the studio. I had no car. He picked me up with my drum machine, let's roll, and I went down there. It worked."

One of the first tracks they cut was "Pour Out a Little Liquor," a song that paid homage to those killed by street violence.

And now they buried,
sometimes my eyes still get blurry.
Cause I'm losin' all my homies and I worry

In Johnny "J," Tupac finally found a partner who liked to work as fast, as much, and as hard as he did. Johnny's hard-cutting beats would help Tupac document life in the hood. The two banged out nine more songs in just three days. It was Tupac's preferred pace. When he was focused, nothing could distract him. He even worked in the studio on his twenty-second birthday. Watani asked Tupac if he wanted to take a night off from his packed schedule and celebrate over dinner, but Tupac turned him down. "Man, I appreciate that, but I'm goin' to the studio."

"But it's your birthday," Watani urged.

"Yeah, but that's where I wanna be."

The studio had become Tupac's refuge. With so much going on, it was a space where he could escape and express himself. The sound booth was his couch, the microphone his therapist. If he wasn't performing or sitting in front of a camera interviewing or promoting one of his projects, he was in the studio. Tupac explained, "I purged myself of nightmares, dreams, hopes, wishes, plans, plots, memories, fantasies; that's what the studio is. That booth is my confession. It's my drug. That's all I have."

No matter how hard he tried, for every good thing that happened, there seemed to be more that pulled him down, from the death of friends like Big Kato to getting fired from the cast of *Menace II Society*, from dealing with his lawsuits to the sluggish sales of *Strictly*'s first single, "Holler If Ya Hear Me."

But that trajectory changed in an instant on June 10 of that year, when Interscope dropped the second single, "I Get Around." Where "Holler If Ya Hear Me" had more political and social themes, "I Get Around" showed Tupac and his Digital Underground friends having fun, chronicling their conquests with braggadocious claims. The song spent twenty-five weeks on the U.S. *Billboard* charts, peaking at number 11 and reaching the number 5 position on the U.S. R&B charts.

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Interscope had signed Tupac as its first hip-hop artist in 1990, but by the spring of 1993 things were about to change. A year earlier, amid the political battle over rap lyrics, John McClain came into Interscope Records and played a rough mix of Dr. Dre's album *The Chronic* to Tom, Jimmy, and Ted. Without hesitation, Interscope cut a deal that put the label deep into the exploding world of gangsta rap. With a $10 million buy-in, they had financed and agreed to distribute a fledgling independent label that would soon become legendary and infamous—Death Row Records. Founded by the Compton-bred former high school star and college athlete Marion "Suge" Knight and N.W.A's rapper/producer Dr. Dre, along with rapper The D.O.C. and promoter Dick Griffey, Death Row had reached stratospheric heights with the release of *The Chronic*, which eventually sold millions of copies and vaulted Dre and his featured performer Snoop Dogg to international fame.

By the time *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* had established itself on the charts, Tupac's name was already on Suge Knight's want list for Death Row's roster. "I used to always see Suge," Tupac said. "When they did the soundtrack for *Murder Was the Case,* and I was going through all those legal problems, he was like, 'Yo, give me a song, dog.' I gave him a song, and I got the most I ever got for a song. It was damn near an album budget. I got something like $200,000 or $150,000 for one song, and they didn't even use it. But I still got paid for everything I did for the soundtrack….He had asked me to come to Death Row, and I was like I ain't ready." Suge didn't press. "Instead of taking it personal, he just did that for me, and I appreciated that."

Tupac was focused on growing his own label. That year he'd changed the name from Underground Railroad to Out Da Gutta Records. He hired a friend and Black Panther comrade of Afeni, visual artist Emory Douglas, to create a logo depicting a man climbing out of a manhole and planned to sign his artist friends, including Mystah and the Havenotz. But when he told Tom Whalley about his plan, Whalley was concerned that it might be a bit premature for Tupac to start signing new artists before his own career stabilized. He feared Tupac would get distracted launching other artists' careers and have less time to focus on his own. "I remember thinking, we're just getting started," Whalley recalled. "This could be a recipe for disaster. I said let's not take it all on at one time." Tupac tried to be patient. In the meantime, he continued to let everyone know that his *Thug Life* album was happening and that the songs he was recording would be aligned with his movement.

By the summer, the mounting stress of the ongoing legal challenges started to manifest itself in different ways. Around this time, Tupac noticed that his hair was falling out at an alarming rate. A dermatologist diagnosed him with alopecia areata, an autoimmune condition that causes periodic patches of hair loss. The causes can be hereditary but can also be induced by acute stress. Tupac started shaving his head. To calm his increasing anxiety, he continued to smoke excessive amounts of weed throughout the day, alternating between blunts and cigarettes, lighting one after the next. Eventually, Tupac felt this habit growing out of control and asked Afeni and Watani to take him to an acupuncturist to lessen the addictive cravings. The cure was short-lived. “It lasted a day,” Watani recalled. “He came out and punched a hole through a window.”

On July 3, 1993, when he spoke at the twenty-third annual Indiana Black Expo, he stood at the podium in front of a ballroom of guests and held nothing back. For thirty minutes, he made an impassioned, emotional plea that tied together his growing anger with white America’s ongoing refusal to give a damn. “First of all, y’all gonna think there’s something wrong with me. ’Cause I’m losing it,” he told the crowd. “I mean that for real….I know you all can pick up the papers and say that man got problems. And I do….But we all got problems. And mine, it’s about my motherfuckin’ self.” He wove a story for the audience about the struggles of his youth in Baltimore, Afeni’s crack addiction, and more. Eventually, he brought things back to his Thug Life project. “And when I say ‘Thug Life,’ I mean that shit,” he said. “ ’Cause these white folks see us as thugs. I don’t care what y’all think. I don’t care if you think you’re a lawyer…if you a man…if you are African American. If you’re whatever the fuck you think you are—we’re thugs and niggas to these muthafuckas. And until we own shit, I’m gonna call it like it is.”

He tied his own rage to the events that had shattered Black America, and the frustration and powerlessness he felt in response. “Shit changed,” he said. “ ’Cause I used to be a cool mutha….I used to be happy…. But goddamn, they took Latasha [Harlins], then done took Yusuf [Hawkins]. They takin’ out niggas younger than me. And we ain’t doin’ shit….We’ve been marchin’ for damn near a hundred years. We are marchin’ on an anniversary of what we marched twenty-five years ago. It’s a muthafuckin’ shame.” He ended with a heartfelt plea for unity: “So all I’m sayin’, in closing, is that we got to be united….Don’t let shit hold us apart. I don’t care if you’re from Cali, New York, or wherever or you’re a Blood or a Crip or a thug or a student or a scholar or whatever. Don't let shit hold you back no more. We got to unite by any means necessary and we got to fight!"

For all Tupac wished to pull things together, to unite, he continued to struggle when it came to his personal choices. Around this time, when Tupac visited the set of rap artist Spice 1's music video for the song "Trigga Gots No Heart," which would appear on the *Menace II Society* soundtrack, he and the Hughes brothers found themselves in the same space for the first time since he learned on MTV News he was fired from the film. As Tupac greeted his friends, he spotted the Hughes brothers arriving. After he shouted a string of accusations and obscenities at them, and Albert Hughes quickly headed for the exit, Tupac and others surrounded Allen. Tupac threw the first punch. As Allen tried to defend himself, everyone piled on, giving him no room to fight back. "I got Tupac by the neck and gettin' ready to punch him and just like a movie," Hughes recalled, "blood spurtin' everywhere. I never been rat-packed before."

Weeks later, Tupac was charged with assaulting the Hughes brothers and found himself having to defend himself in the Los Angeles courts.

Tupac couldn't wait to tell the world what happened. On July 16, during an interview on *Yo! MTV Raps* in New York to promote *Poetic Justice,* Tupac boasted about the incident even as he was defending himself in the civil lawsuit against him on that very charge. "I beat up the directors to *Menace II Society.* Let me tell the whole world," he said in the interview. The network's radio personality, Ed Lover, tried to cut Tupac off to keep him from saying anything else self-incriminating, but Tupac would not be stopped. Looking directly into the camera, he told the world that the Hughes brothers had fired him in a "roundabout punk snitch way, so I caught 'em on the streets and beat they behinds." At this point, those gathered on set tried to talk over him. No luck. "And it ain't over," Tupac yelled, though he was also obviously having fun, perhaps not fully realizing the legal implications of what he was saying. "I was a menace to the Hughes brothers." Finally, Lover clamped a hand over Tupac's mouth.

At the end of the interview, still amped up, he added, "Can you just hook it up for me to box both the Hughes brothers for charity? For charity?

How ’bout that? In the rings with gloves on: me, against both them chumps, for charity?” It may have been an attempt to lighten the moment, but the Hughes brothers didn’t accept his reach-out. To them, the damage was already done.

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One week later, on July 23, 1993, *Poetic Justice* premiered in theaters nationwide and quickly became a box-office success, bringing in nearly $12 million in its opening weekend, good enough to earn it the top spot. And though reviewers were of two minds as to whether director John Singleton had pulled off a successful follow-up to his groundbreaking debut, *Boyz n the Hood,* Tupac garnered rave reviews for his performance as Lucky the postman. *Variety* magazine noted that “Shakur turns in truly outstanding work.” *Entertainment Weekly* wrote, “Tupac Shakur, who was so startling as the heavy-lidded sociopath in Ernest Dickerson’s *Juice,* makes the ardent Lucky a complex and compelling figure.”

On the same night that thousands of moviegoers were heading to theaters to see Tupac onscreen, a smaller group at the Palladium night club in New York were about to witness a landmark moment of a different kind. There, Tupac was onstage performing with a new friend: Christopher Wallace, aka “Notorious B.I.G.”—“Biggie.” The two had met through Stretch months before, during the filming of *Poetic Justice,* and had become fast friends. During production, Tupac often blared Biggie’s song “Party and Bullshit” from his trailer. Biggie sometimes spent nights on Tupac’s couch at his L.A. apartment, and in turn he took Tupac to Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Brooklyn neighborhood where he had grown up. “I always thought it to be like a Gemini thing,” Biggie would say of their relationship in an interview. “We just clicked off the top and were cool ever since.”

Months later, in October, Tupac and Biggie ended up onstage together again, this time for an impromptu freestyle the night of the Budweiser Superfest at Madison Square Garden. At an R&B concert headlined by Patti LaBelle, Tupac and Biggie, their friendship growing stronger, grabbed the mics as they started the show. Sweat dripping off his forehead, Tupac spoke with an urgent conviction, one that took on new meaning as he started to promote his Thug Life movement out on the road. “Let me tell you all about this Thug Life shit before you start the next music,” he told the crowd. “Thug Life is not what these white folks is trying to paint it to be….If we all got together and used the fear that these white people have for us any muthafuckin’ way, we might have something. One nigga can’t do shit. But a million niggas, we’ll work this muthafuckin’ country.”

That night Biggie chanted his iconic line: “Where Brooklyn at!?” and Tupac freestyled a verse from his song “Nothing to Lose.” Together, the two rocked the audience packed into the Garden. “One of the illest hip-hop performances of all time,” recalled DJ Mister Cee, who was onstage. “We just brought all of them onstage and the magic happened.”

The pair took the stage together again that month, at Maryland’s Bowie State University, with a large, rowdy crew of fellow rap artists, some of them Tupac’s recruits for his Thug Life movement, some friends from New York. Everyone danced or paced the stage bobbing their heads, each taking turns on the mic. Biggie hit the audience with “Party and Bullshit,” yelling “Thug Life!” as he finished, and Tupac told the crowd to show him some love. The mood, the smiles, all of it, could lead one to believe their friendship was cemented that evening by a mutual respect for each other’s evident talent.

Notably, that night Tupac and Biggie staged a dramatic moment, an onstage brawl that eerily foreshadowed one of the most iconic beefs in hip-hop history. Tupac strutted across the stage as Biggie performed and aggressively jumped on him, making the audience wonder whether a violent fight was about to break out. But when the music dropped out and the MC onstage, who was in on the joke, said, “Hold on, hold on, hold on!” Biggie delivered his lyric in the song: “Can’t we all get along?!” Everyone onstage erupted. It was all in good fun.

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The summer of 1993 brought Tupac to a new level of fame and success. Where *2Pacalypse Now* and *Juice* had helped break him, “I Get Around” and *Poetic Justice* had helped him reach an even higher level of fame. During the first half of the year, he went on the road. Afeni sent him off with custom travel packages that contained condoms, bail bondsmen’s phone numbers, prayer cloths, and vitamins. The turnout had been lower than hoped—some venues were practically empty. “I remember one time, I think we were in Ohio somewhere and nobody showed up,” Syke remembered. “So we just got drinks and partied. We went to the middle of the floor and started dancing ourselves.”

But with the overnight success of *Poetic Justice,* Tupac’s public image had quickly grown. “If Tupac was good enough to kiss Janet Jackson, he was good enough for them,” Syke proposed. Whether it was the lasting impression his character, Lucky, made on viewers or his onscreen romance with Janet Jackson, his fan base seemed to have exploded overnight. Just days after the movie’s release, the scant audiences at his performances turned into screaming, adoring fans.

By the end of 1993, Tupac put the finishing touches on his *Thug Life* album. The album featured Big Syke, Mopreme, Stretch, and Spice 1, as well as Rated R, Macadoshis, and Richie Rich. Matt Hall of the UK’s *Select* magazine called it “a shockingly considered, thoughtful rap record…and a very chilling one.”

Even Interscope was swayed by Tupac’s newfound public adoration. It changed its initial position and offered Tupac a contract to distribute the *Thug Life* album. It was official. Out da Gutta Records signed, through a joint venture, to Interscope Records. And now Tupac would be able to sign other artists to his label.

The two years since signing his record deal marked an extraordinary run of productivity. Tupac completed three albums and starred in two films. With no signs of him taking his foot off the gas pedal, he continued tackling project after project. And as he raced from film set to video shoot to recording studio, his fan base continued to grow. “I Get Around” found the success that “Holler If Ya Hear Me” had not, climbing the *Billboard* charts from the week of its debut. Near the end of July 1993, *Poetic Justice* was number one at the box office and “I Get Around” was certified platinum, with over a million copies sold.

Inside the whirlwind of both this newfound success and the ongoing legal claims, Tupac found himself needing a home base more than ever before. He also needed his family. With the money he was earning from his music and movie projects, he decided to purchase his first home, in the state of Georgia.

Afeni and Aunt Jean were already there. Months earlier, they had received a call on a rainy afternoon in New York from their longtime family friend Malcolm Greenidge (E.D.I.). “He called to tell us that Black people were doing great down there,” Jean remembered. “Once he said they were buying big houses that are much more affordable than New York, we decided to move. And since T.C. was retired, it was a good time.” After Jean and T.C. had settled into their new home and Afeni into her own apartment, both in the town of Decatur, Tupac followed Malcolm’s advice as well. With Watani’s help, he found a split-level 2,400-square-foot house in the suburb of Lithonia, Georgia. It was big enough for everyone to gather, celebrate holidays, and make memories.

On the day the furniture was delivered, Jean and Afeni greeted the moving trucks in front of the house. They’d come a long way from the many walk-up tenements the Shakurs had once inhabited in Harlem. They sat on the porch of the new house, bathing in the delight of Tupac’s success, savoring in this monumental moment. It was the first time anyone in the family had been able to buy a home since their great-grandmother Millie Ann had in the 1950s in Lumberton, North Carolina. “It was not a U-Haul, and it wasn’t the uncles and cousins draggin’ the mattresses up the stairs,” Jean said. “It was a moving van. It was a big day for us.”

Tupac named the new house Thugz Mansion and would eventually write a song of the same name. In the song Tupac described his home as a sanctuary, “a place to spend my quiet nights. Time to unwind, so much pressure in this life of mine.”

17

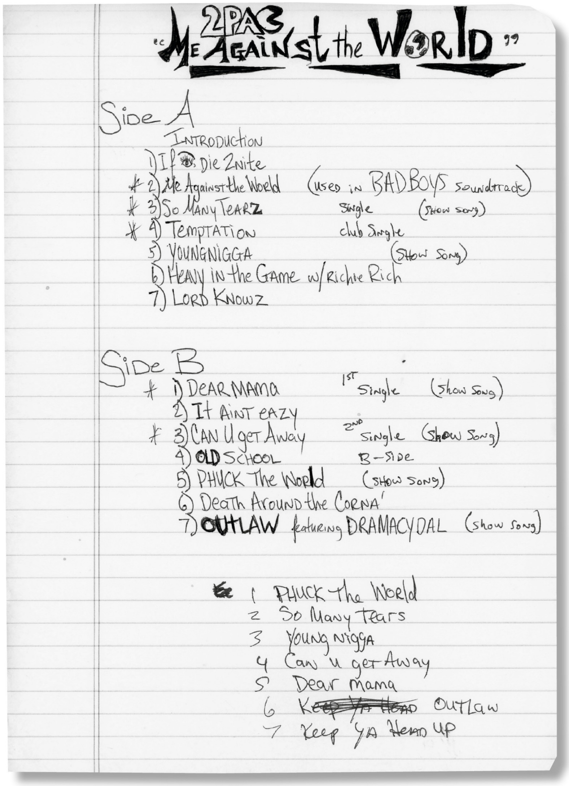
ME AGAINST THE WORLD

1993

> The question I wonder is after death, after my last breath,
> when will I finally get to rest through this oppression?
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

Between starring as a villain in his first leading movie role, then the romantic lead in a road-trip love story between a postman and a poet in his second, Tupac had found success portraying two very different characters. He was eager to find out where his next role would take him. He had kept his promise after telling Allen Hughes about his De Niro/Scorsese connection with John Singleton, and soon Singleton called to offer him a part in his next film, *Higher Learning,* a movie about racism and cultural prejudice on a university campus. Tupac would portray a college student, a role that would further broaden the range of his acting capabilities.

While he waited for his deal to be negotiated with the film studio, Tupac started to record songs for his fourth album, which he planned to call *Me Against the World*. For this album, he wanted to take a more contemplative and introspective approach to his ongoing mission to call out society's injustices and shine a light on life in the inner city. He had no intention of slowing down.



2PAC
"Me Against the World"

Side A
Introduction
1) If 👁 Die 2nite
* 2) Me Against the World (used in BAD BOYS soundtrack)
* 3) So Many Tearz Single (Show Song)
* 4) Temptation club Single
5) YoungNigga (Show Song)
6) Heavy in the Game w/Richie Rich
7) Lord Knowz

Side B
* 1) Dear Mama 1st Single (Show Song)
2) It Aint eazy
* 3) Can U get Away 2nd Single (Show Song)
4) Old School B-Side
5) Phuck The World (Show Song)
6) Death Around the Corna'
7) Outlaw featuring Dramacydal (show song)

1 Phuck the World
2 So Many Tears
3 Young Nigga
4 Can u get Away
5 Dear mama
6 ~~Keep Ya Head~~ OutLaw
7 Keep Ya Head up

Handwritten track list for Tupac's album *Me Against the World.*

Click here to view as text

One night at Echo Studios, at around two in the morning when everyone else had left besides Tupac and his sound engineer, there was someone else still working. His name was Tony Pizarro, and for weeks he had been asking Tupac to cut a song with him. Pizzaro, a producer and engineer, had recently finished successful collaborations with Tevin Campbell and Teena Marie, and done some sound engineering for Ice-T. But it wasn't just *who* Pizarro had worked with that impressed Tupac. It was that he was pulling all-nighters, a quality that Tupac looked for in the people he worked with. The two made plans to work together.

The first track they recorded was a song called "High 'Til I Die." But one evening, Tupac came to Pizarro's place with a new song. It was one that he had already been working on, a song that would come to be associated with him more powerfully than almost any other he would write, a song that captured the essence of the most important relationship he would have in his short life. Like many songs before, he recorded it in just one take.

"Dear Mama" was a declaration of Tupac's love for his mother, a love that had persevered and grown through setbacks, challenges, and pain. In recent years, they had repaired much of the damage done to their relationship. The blow Tupac had suffered due to his mother's addiction had been a hard one, and his respect for her had faltered, but over time, he realized that no matter what happened, he loved her more than anyone else in the world. She empowered him by giving him a sense of himself as a strong Black man worthy of respect and dignity in a world that she knew would treat him otherwise. The song was an extraordinary display of forgiveness, a personal expression that revealed the most sacred aspects of their mother-and-son journey. It also told a story that would come to resonate with mothers and their children across the country and all over the world.

A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how you did it
There's no way I can pay you back
But the plan is to show you that I understand

In an MTV interview with Bill Bellamy years later, Tupac explained, " 'Dear Mama'…is a love song to my mama….I just wrote it down and it came out like tears. Right after I wrote it, I called my mom. I rapped it to her over the phone, like, live. She was crying. I was like, 'That's a hit.' " He wasn't wrong.

As Tupac continued to record songs for album number four, he sat down in the Interscope offices with Tom Whalley to discuss his progress.

Tupac cut to the chase. "I need more beats."

Perplexed, Whalley stared at him.

Tupac said it again. "I need more beats."

Whalley was drawing a blank. "Tupac was the first hip-hop artist signed to Interscope, and I'm always shocked at how much I had to learn to give him the support he needed," he recalled. "I remember thinking I can't screw this up and fail on my promises to him. I had predominantly worked with musicians and bands. They go into the studio and make a record. Finding beats wasn't part of my record-making process. So, I called a friend, Randy Cohen, who I knew could help out."

Days later, Tupac had a handful of new beats at his disposal. He picked a couple that he liked, called Whalley, and asked to meet with the producers at the studio.

Not long after, Tupac received a call from Cohen, who managed Soulshock & Karlin, the Danish songwriter/producer duo who had caught his attention with some of the beats Whalley had presented. He'd hoped to schedule a time for them to meet. Soulshock laughs at the memory of the one request he made moments before Cohen made the call. "Can you just let him know we're white?"

After they hung up, Tupac called Whalley right away.

"Tom," Tupac said.

"What?"

"Really?"

"What?"

"Those producers."

"Did you meet them yet?" Whalley asked.

"They're two white guys."

"Do you like the beats?"

"Yes."

"Then go make the fucking song," Whalley said, laughing.

Neither Tupac nor Soulshock, whose real name was Carsten Schack, realized they had crossed paths previously. But before they met face-to-face, Tupac suddenly put it all together: Soulshock was one of the DJs who had been on tour with Queen Latifah when Tupac was hired as a roadie and backup dancer years before. On his way to the studio, on the planned day they were to meet for the first time, Soulshock got a call. It was Tupac with a revelation. "I know who the fuck you are! I used to carry your fuckin' turntables and pick them up for you for your fucking show!" The ice was broken. Then he said, "So get your white ass down here!"

They got to work. Soulshock recalled that the first studio session wasn't quite what the duo was used to. "There would be twenty people, girls, and everybody had to put their guns down, so by the time people are sitting down next to the boards, there's just this huge pile of guns," he said. "And Hennessy is floating, and the weed is out, and I just remember my partner, Karlin, was like, 'I'm going to leave now.' And that's what he did."

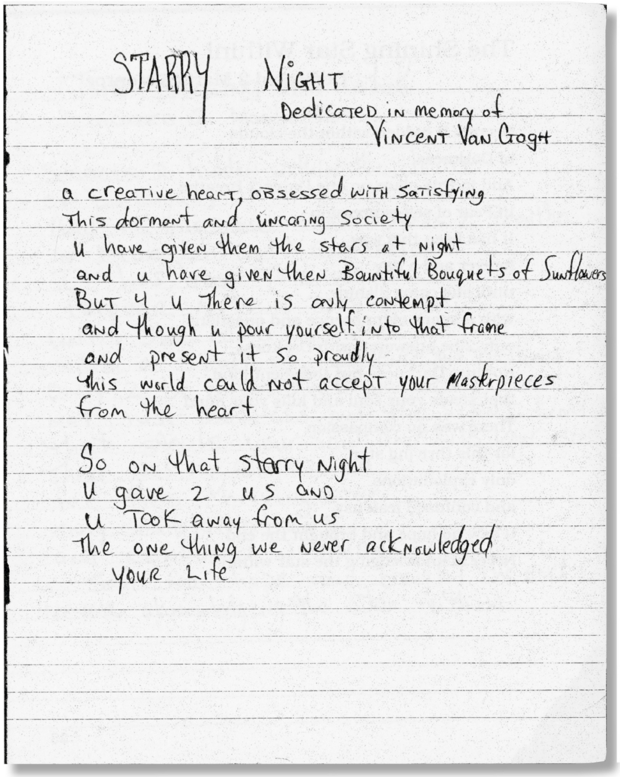
Soulshock stayed, and within days they came out of the studio with two songs: "Old School" and the album's title track, "Me Against the World."

Still seeking beats, Tupac called on Shock G. On the day they met, Tupac was eager to start working and paced around the room while he waited for Shock to set up his equipment. Always holding a blunt in hand, Tupac would pause for a quiet review of his lyrics and then burst into action on cue. Shock remembered the day vividly. "Like a racehorse when the gate opens, he rushed into the booth when it was time and did three takes of the entire song one at a time," Shock said. "But each pass he spit the whole song, all three verses and choruses all the way down in one nonstop take."

In that session, Tupac and Shock created one of his most prophetic songs, "So Many Tears." Its lyrics are agonizing, tracing his arc from a young man in Baltimore to his awakening to the Thug Life project and the sense of unification in its mission. The song offered listeners a window into Tupac's mind as he chronicled his own pain and suicidal thoughts. The song sounded a cry from an artist trapped in a cycle of suffering and facing—even marching toward—an early demise. The lyrics were eerily reminiscent of his poem "Starry Night," written four years before, about Vincent van Gogh's lonely, underappreciated life and early death by suicide.

My every move is a calculated step
To bring me closer to embrace an early death

Tupac's album *Me Against the World* would be filled with some of his most vulnerable songs to date. "It was all out of my heart," he explained. "It's as close to telling the truth and selling records as I could possibly get, and most of my music is like that if you look back over past albums. I just try to speak about things that affect me and things that affect our community. Sometimes I’m the watcher, sometimes I’m the participant, and sometimes it’s just allegories or fables that have a moral or underlying theme.”



STARRY NIGHT
Dedicated in memory of
Vincent Van Gogh

a creative heart, obsessed with Satisfying
This dormant and uncaring Society
u have given them the stars at night
and u have given then Bountiful Bouquets of Sunflowers
But 4 u There is only contempt
and though u pour yourself into that frame
and present it so proudly
this world could not accept your Masterpieces
from the heart

So on that starry night
u gave 2 us and
u Took away from us
The one thing we never acknowledged
your Life

Inspired by the life of Vincent van Gogh, Tupac wrote this poem when he was a teenager. It would later be published in *The Rose That Grew from Concrete,* a collection of Tupac’s poetry.

Click here to view as text

Despite how positive Tupac felt about the new songs for his upcoming album, he still struggled in other parts of his career. The higher he climbed the ladder of success, the more disastrous it seemed to be each time he fell. Tupac found himself in a holding pattern with *Higher Learning,* due to concerns at Columbia Pictures about his legal troubles. In the meantime, producers Barry Michael Cooper and Benny Medina and director Jeff Pollack had recently started casting for their movie *Above the Rim,* with a story based on Harlem’s Rucker Park streetball and the drug dealers who worked along the park's perimeter. They asked Tupac to star in the film as Birdie, a New York street hustler. And through Death Row Records owner Suge Knight, Tupac was also given the opportunity to record music for the film's soundtrack.

Tupac's costars included Duane Martin, Leon, Bernie Mac, Wood Harris, and Marlon Wayans. Tupac and Wayans were assigned a two-bedroom trailer together, which meant Wayans had to deal with Tupac's constant weed smoking. "He literally turned our trailer into a blunt," Wayans joked. Yet the two established an endearing on-set friendship. "I used to call him the Palmolive Thug because the man had the softest hands," Wayans recalled. "They were like Palmolive model hands. And his eyelashes. I told him he had eyelashes like Snuffleupagus." Their friendship was mostly filled with comedy and shared laughs, but Wayans would also try to give him advice about his Thug Life project: "Maybe you should cross out the *T* and change the Thug Life image to HUG LIFE."

Events that would soon unfold in late October and November of 1993 would cement for a part of the public a certain image of Tupac, one steeped in violence and anger. The full picture, of course, was far more complicated, as exemplified by an incident during this time that showed the depths of Tupac's kindness and love for children. In mid-October, between full days filming on set, enjoying the New York Club scene, and pulling all-nighters in the studio, Tupac received word through WPGC radio in Maryland about a young boy named Joshua Torres who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. The eleven-year-old idolized Tupac and hoped he could talk to him over the phone before he succumbed to his sickness. The two had a brief conversation, and at the end of the call, Joshua asked if Tupac would visit him in person. Tupac told him he would see what he could do. When Tupac told the producers he had to leave town for a couple of days, they balked, worried about the financial toll of halting production in his absence, but Tupac left the set anyway and made his way to Aberdeen, Maryland. Joshua's mother recalled the moment Tupac arrived at her son's bedside: "Joshua was very weak, but he smiled for him and quoted some of his lyrics." The two spent their time together smiling, crying, and getting to know each other. Tupac tried his best to comfort Joshua, holding his hand while they talked.

The encounter had a strong impact on Tupac. Days after he returned to the movie set, Joshua's parents called to thank him for coming to see their son and to let him know he had passed away less than an hour after Tupac left their home. To honor the young boy, weeks later, Tupac renamed his Ghetto Gospel publishing company Joshua's Dream.

Sometimes Tupac also used breaks in his crammed schedule to call and check in with his family in Atlanta. One evening, Aunt (Gloria) Jean's phone rang. It was Tupac on the other line. He had been listening to the song "Gloria" by the '70s band Enchantment and decided to call her. She smiled warmly as she listened to her nephew sing loudly through the phone, laughing as he belted out the words "Gloooorrrriaaa my Gloriaaaaaaa! Things ain't been the same since you went away." During the call, he called her "Glo," and at that moment she went from Aunt Jean to Glo and never looked back.

When his breaks were longer than a day or two, instead of a quick phone call, he would fly to see them in Atlanta. During these breaks, he would also spend time with his protégé rap group, which consisted of Katari and friends from his childhood in New York, Yafeu Fula and Malcolm Greenidge. After spending that summer in Northern California with Tupac, they had returned home to resume their high school classes before dedicating all their time to writing music and pursuing rap careers. The name of the group had changed from Escape from New York to the Thoroheads. Tupac was a consistent source of encouragement and advice to the fledgling group. He eagerly helped prepare them for a life in the music business and made plans to put them in the studio as soon as they were done with high school. Mutah Beale, a childhood friend of Yafeu's, had also flown down to Atlanta and moved into the Shakur home. Mutah was a solo artist at first, but became a part of the group after the four of them wrote a song, "Killing Fields," together. "When Pac heard it he loved it," Mutah recalled. "And he liked how I fit [with the others]. He said 'I want you in the group' and he changed the name to Dramacydal." After Tupac played

“Killing Fields” for some of the heads at Interscope, the label offered to fund studio time for Dramacydal to get started on their album.

Taking care of the members of Dramacydal became a priority in Tupac’s life. He taught them life lessons and educated them about history and society. He reprimanded them when they didn’t listen to his advice and often insisted that they work on their craft, develop a work ethic as strong as his. Perhaps because he had grown up without a father of his own, Tupac treasured the fatherly role he came to play for the members of Dramacydal. He returned to Atlanta to check on them often.

On one of these trips to Atlanta to see Afeni, Sekyiwa, Glo, and the cousins, Tupac performed at nearby Clark Atlanta University. During the event, a fight broke out in the crowd, and Watani and Tupac’s cousin Bill escorted Tupac offstage and out the back door. Ducking into his new BMW, Tupac drove toward his hotel with a caravan of friends and family behind him. As the cars pulled up to a red light in front of the hotel, Tupac noticed a scuffle between two white men and a Black man. One of the white men punched the Black man in the head, sending him to the ground. Any kind of racially charged encounter set Tupac off, even if those involved were complete strangers. He bolted out of the car and confronted the attackers.

Dante, Tupac’s cousin, was driving the car behind Tupac’s in the long line of cars waiting at the light. “Pac stops the car. Gets out of the car. ’Cause I guess he saw a Black man being attacked by white people,” Dante recalled. “All he had to do was turn into the hotel and we would have been in the room, but [the white] dude pulls out a big ol’ gun. And then he was like, ‘Fuck y’all niggers. I will kill all you muthafuckas!’ ”

When Tupac got out of the car, one of the men walked up to him and pointed the gun straight at him.

“I started having flashbacks of Rodney King and Kunta Kinte,” Tupac recalled later.

Tupac refused to back down.

He turned to everyone in his car, all the while keeping his eyes on the man and his gun, “Someone give me my gun!”

No one moved.

He yelled again, “Someone give me my gun.”

Suddenly, one of the men used the butt of his gun to smash one of the windows in Tupac’s car before both took off running. The victim, the Black man who had been punched to the ground moments before, crawled to his car and drove away.

Tupac reached into his car and grabbed his gun.

He quickly scanned the street and saw the two men. He took a knee, in a military stance, and aimed his gun. “Everybody get the fuck down!” he called out. Then he fired.

According to *The New York Times,* two bullets found their way into his targets. Both men were knocked to the ground. One was struck in the buttocks, the other in the abdomen.

Then, as if none of it had just happened, Tupac invited his entourage up to his hotel room. Majesty, Stretch’s brother, stared out the hotel window toward the scene of what had just happened. The two men Tupac shot were being taken away by paramedics. “I think they were cops,” Majesty announced to the room. “Man, I think those two men you shot were cops.”

Dante couldn’t believe that Tupac was hosting people in his hotel room after he’d just shot two people outside. “I was scared to death,” he recalled. “I just saw this nigga shoot two white people. Get my mama on the phone. I’m gettin’ the hell outta here.”

Tupac yelled out to the room, “Yo, wait a minute everybody….I want everybody to hear my new song.”

Within seconds Tupac’s voice filled the room as “Dear Mama” began to play.

Dante recounted the moment: “He’s over there rolling up weed, laughin’ and playin’ music like he didn’t just shoot two people.”

Shortly, a knock at the door startled everyone in the room except Tupac, who was calmly rolling a blunt.

Someone looked through the peephole and announced, “It’s the police.”

“Okay, fine, let ’em in,” Tupac said.

Dante’s shock doubled. He recalled, “I said, ‘What?! What do you mean let ’em in? You just killed two people outside!’ ”

The moment the police entered the suite, they looked right at Tupac. “You! Come on.”

Tupac got up and made no bones about it. “I did it,” he said. “Yeah, I did it.”

Tupac was arrested and released on $55,059 bond. And, yes, the two men *were* cops, and even though they were off-duty, it didn’t change the fact that Tupac had shot two police officers. But his instincts for the situation he had seen from the car window hadn’t failed him. Soon it was revealed that the off-duty cops were drunk, and that the gun they used to smash Tupac’s window had been originally seized in a drug bust and then stolen from an evidence locker. In a remarkable turn of events, the case against him was dropped.

Since Tupac had signed his record deal, he’d been traveling at lightning speed, reveling in the instant fame and money that his overnight success brought. As the pace of his life and career continued to pick up, to one that few could keep up with, he failed to stop or pause to clear his mind and avoid making decisions that could bring negative consequences.

And as he continued to move forward with reckless abandon, just weeks after the altercation in Atlanta with the off-duty police officers, Tupac faced another incident. This one would bring his life to a screeching halt and set him onto the darkest path of his existence, one from which he would never fully find his way back.

While filming *Above the Rim* in New York that October, Tupac had befriended a Haitian-born, Brooklyn-raised music promoter named Jacques Agnant at the Octagon nightclub. Agnant had quite the reputation around New York, not only in the streets for sticking up drug dealers but also throughout the city’s nightclubs, where he rubbed shoulders with music and sports industry VIPs. Tupac mentioned to those close to him that he’d wanted to hang around Agnant to pattern his *Above the Rim* character, Birdie, after him. Agnant provided yet another window into America’s street culture for Tupac to study. Shortly after he met Agnant, Tupac purchased a brand-new 7 Series BMW and a Rolex, and traded in his baggy jeans for a handful of high-end designer suits.

Tupac's closest friends and family warned him against this fast friendship, including Watani. "Me and Man-Man tell him, 'This dude ain't right,' " Watani recalled. "Everybody's telling him, 'He ain't right.' We can see that shit. We all told him to leave this cat alone. Mike Tyson is telling him to leave the shit alone. When Mike is telling you that shit, it may be time to listen."

Tupac didn't listen. Instead he joined Agnant's social circle and found himself popping bottles of Champagne at Manhattan's most exclusive nightclubs. One night in November while hanging out at a popular spot called Nell's, Tupac met a nineteen-year-old woman named Ayanna Jackson.

The details of what happened in the days ahead would forever be in dispute. By some reports, he was introduced to Jackson; according to others, he introduced himself. Soon the two of them were on the dance floor. Tupac later recounted what followed, as they danced to the loud reggae beats that pulsed throughout the club, to journalist Kevin Powell—that she had performed oral sex on him on the dance floor. While Jackson later claimed that she did not, that she only "kissed it," she did confirm that the two had consensual sex later that night in his room at the Parker Meridien hotel "two or three times."

A few days later, on the night of November 18, Jackson returned to the Parker Meridien and ended up back in the bedroom with Tupac, kissing him and massaging his back after he complained he was tired from his long day on the set of *Above the Rim.*

Others in the hotel suite included Jacques Agnant, Man-Man, and another man who has never been identified. Tupac didn't testify at the trial that would follow, but he later gave a long interview about it to *Vibe* magazine. "So we get in the [bed]room," he recalled of himself and Jackson. "I'm laying on my stomach, she's massaging my back. She starts massaging my front. This lasted for about half an hour. In between, we would stop and kiss each other. I'm thinking she's about to give me another blow job, but before she could do that, some niggas came in, and I froze up more than she froze up….So they came and they started touching her ass….I just got up and walked out the room. I went to see Talibah [who was in the other room], and we talked about what she had been doing during the day, then I went and laid down on the couch and went to sleep.”

Tupac next remembered waking up in the common living space on the couch with Jacques Agnant standing over him, calling, “Pac, Pac.” And then moments later Jackson came out of the room angry and upset. “How could you let this happen to me!” she yelled at him.

Jackson would tell a different story, one in which Tupac did not leave when the other men came into the room, but instead forced her to give oral sex to one of the men, and then to Tupac. Jackson left the hotel suite, went into the hallway to call the elevator, and found hotel security, who quickly called the police.

Tupac went downstairs with Agnant and Man-Man. They had plans to meet Biggie and his crew in the lobby, and from there they’d head out to a show in New Jersey together. But when they got off the elevator, the police were waiting for them. Immediately, Tupac, Agnant, and Man-Man, along with Biggie and his crew, were detained and questioned.

Tupac, Agnant, and Man-Man were arrested and charged with weapons possession; forcible oral sex, which was categorized as sodomy; and two counts of sexual abuse, specifically “forcibly touching the buttocks.” Tupac spent five days in jail and was released on $50,000 bail pending trial. Man-Man says of that evening, “I know my brother Pac loved women. He would never take from a woman. He was upset and hurt that what was done to her was done to her, but me and Pac didn’t do what we were accused of.”

Over the previous two years, Tupac had had more than his fair share of run-ins with the law. But these accusations threw him and his family into utter shock and disbelief. Glo recalled, “For me and his mother it was reliving a time. Afeni felt sympathy for the woman, but she never doubted that Tupac was innocent.”

Tupac continued to emphatically deny all allegations of sexual abuse and was completely baffled by and angry over what he considered to be an utterly false claim. Glo remembered, “[He] was not just angry, but *insulted* by the charge.”

What was even more excruciating was that this time he would have to go against a Black woman. The accusation hurt him deeply; he felt betrayed in a specific way. He'd always believed that his overarching mission and his unyielding love for his community, especially his support of young Black women, would protect him from false accusations like this.

All Tupac had was his word. He would spend the next year of his life fighting skewed press reports and naysayers, publicly proclaiming his innocence. There was some irony in the fact that as Tupac continued to vehemently reject the accusations against him, his song "Keep Ya Head Up," written for his "sisters" to let the world know that "Tupac cares" about the suffering of young Black women, climbed the *Billboard* charts. Released on October 28 of that year as the third single from *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.,* the song celebrated the strength of and his respect for Black women:

And since we all came from a woman
Got our name from a woman
And our game from a woman
I wonder why we take from our women
Why we rape our women
Do we hate our women?
I think it's time to kill for our women
Time to heal our women
Be real to our women
And if we don't
We'll have a race of babies
That hate the ladies that make the babies
And since a man can't make one
He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one
So will the real men get up
I know you're fed up, ladies
But keep ya head up.

It was a dark time for Tupac. Between the controversy, his arrests, and the field day the media was having, he lost his role in *Higher Learning*. "I wrote *Higher Learning* for him," John Singleton told *Vibe* years later. "Pac ended up getting in trouble and then all that stuff happened in New York. It was logistically impossible."

As Tupac was attempting to defend his honor, even the good news that came his way tended to fuel the controversy around him. Near the end of the year, when the NAACP Image Award nominees were announced, Tupac was chosen for his role as Lucky in *Poetic Justice*. He was in good company, right next to Denzel Washington, who had portrayed Malcolm X in Spike Lee's celebrated biopic. But news of Tupac Shakur being nominated for an Image Award brought him further into the firestorm of public criticism. The National Political Congress of Black Women, a decades-old nonprofit founded by first Black congresswomen Shirley Chisholm and C. DeLores Tucker, asked the NAACP to retract his nomination and ban his attendance the night of the awards ceremony. Tupac was no stranger to Tucker, who had launched an anti–gangster rap crusade and staged protests outside record stores to dissuade consumers from buying rap albums, which she referred to as "cultural garbage." Singer Dionne Warwick joined Tucker's fusillade against Tupac's award nomination.

The NAACP awards were held on January 5, 1994, but Denzel Washington took home the prize that night over Tupac. Jasmine Guy, Tupac's friend and confidante, also won an award that evening for her performance on *A Different World*. When she arrived at the press tent after the show, she was bombarded by questions from the reporters—most of them about Tupac. "They wanted to know if I thought he deserved an Image Award with the kind of image he had developed," she recalled. "I didn't know what they were talking about at first. I was thrown off. I was ready to talk about the show [not Tupac]."

The controversy around the Image Awards bothered him. In the Blue Palm recording studio, weeks later, Tupac spoke to writer and documentarian Dream Hampton, blasting everyone who supported those who spoke out against him over the awards. “Those niggas ain’t want me there,” he said, “and they gave motherfucking Michael Jackson a standing ovation?”

In February, Tupac appeared in Los Angeles Municipal Court to plead his case against the Hughes brothers. As soon as the clerk called the case, *The People v. Shakur,* everyone was notified of a last-minute courtroom switch. In the hallway, Tupac approached the Hughes brothers’ security, who, with their bow ties and attire, appeared to be four men from the Nation of Islam. Tupac had a question for them. And he didn’t ask it nicely. “Since when did y’all start protecting niggas from other niggas?”

Before they could muster up an answer, the Hughes brothers appeared. Obscenities were exchanged between Allen and Tupac, while Tupac’s attorney, La’Chelle Woodert, tried her best to calm him down. But her efforts were futile. Maybe it was the sight of the Hughes brothers themselves, or maybe it was those always-triggering words—“calm down.” Whatever the cause, Tupac took it up a notch.

Tupac’s usual response: “I don’t give a fuck. Fuck that!”

—

Tupac spent the next few months flying back and forth between Los Angeles and New York, navigating what he referred to as the “valleys” and “mountains” that show business brought to his life. He continued to work on completing *Me Against the World,* performed live at the Source Awards, did numerous interviews, and on March 8, 1994, appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* for the third time. In an interview years later, Arsenio said, “I remember Tupac calling me because he wanted to clear his name about some madness that went on with him and a young lady on the dance floor.”

On the show, Tupac chatted with Arsenio and spoke sincerely about how betrayed he felt by the charges brought against him and how much stress the uncertainty of the outcome caused him. “It bothers me so much to go through my life, and everything I did in my life coming out of a family and a household with just women to get to this point to have a woman say that I took something from her," he told Arsenio.

Two days later, in the case of *The People v. Shakur,* despite a moving letter about Tupac's character sent to Judge Wu by the father of Joshua Torres, the terminally ill young boy Tupac had visited the year before, the case with the Hughes brothers came to an end. Tupac was convicted of assault. As the case unfolded, Tupac learned that the Hughes brothers' attorneys had subpoenaed MTV for the *Yo! MTV Raps* interview segment where he made self-incriminatory remarks, sealing the deal for a ruling against him. On March 10, Tupac was sentenced to fifteen days in the Los Angeles County Jail. Outside the courtroom, he spoke into a microphone: "I think the judge was fair. I still don't feel like I got the decision that I wanted, but he was as fair as he could be. Really, to my homeboys: a fight is a fight. Battery is battery. A two-and-a-half-minute problem just cost me fifteen days in jail." As a result of his sentence, he missed the March 22 premiere of *Above the Rim*.

As the summer arrived, at a time when Tupac least expected to meet someone who would become an anchor in the sea of uncertainty that lay ahead, he found himself in a special relationship with a young woman. The two met at a party at New York's nightclub The Capitol, where Puffy was hosting a party around Father's Day. At the end of the evening, he bumped into her, a petite, twenty-year-old caramel-complected young woman in a corridor near the exit. "I know that you're going through a rough time right now," she said, "but you do have some people out here who are supporting you. Just be careful of the people you have around you." Before Tupac got a chance to reply, the crowd pushed them apart.

But the interaction left an impression. A month later, Tupac spotted the same woman at the Tunnel nightclub and walked up to her. All in one breath he said, "You're the girl who had on a black dress and black boots."

She couldn't believe he remembered her a month after their brief encounter.

"I've been going to every club looking for you," said Tupac.

She shrugged and laughed. "I find that hard to believe."

“Dead serious,” Tupac said. “What’s your name?”

“Keisha.”

After they danced together for a few songs, Tupac bent over, picked up a flyer, tore off a corner, and wrote all his numbers down. “I’m taking you out tomorrow.”

“I have to work,” Keisha replied. A New York native, Keisha was a camp counselor in the summer and a full-time student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the fall.

“Well, what time do you get off work?” he asked.

“Six o’clock.”

Keisha was doubtful that he’d call, but he did. “He called me at six o’clock on the dot and said, ‘Hi, this is Tupac,’ and I was like…what?”

He asked her to meet him in the lobby of his hotel. “Okay,” she said, “but I’m not coming down there to be around a bunch of people.”

Keisha threw on a pair of jeans, a white shirt, and a pair of sneakers. “I didn’t want to dress provocative,” she said. “I didn’t want him to get the wrong impression of me.”

When she arrived, he had already picked the movie. “*Forrest Gump*?” Keisha asked.

“Yeah,” Tupac said. “I was supposed to read for the role of Bubba, but I didn’t get a chance to. So I wanna see what I missed.”

After the movie they walked to a small, cozy Italian restaurant on Eighth Avenue and Twenty-Second Street. Keisha told him about her classes at John Jay College and about the kids she counseled at a summer day camp. He talked about his next album and gave her a preview of the song “Temptations,” rapping to her from across the table. They talked for hours. He confided in her that he was amazed by how much he’d achieved, that he couldn’t believe he’d made a million dollars already. He also talked about his legal problems, explaining that the lawsuits only started happening after he got his first record deal. Then he blurted out that he would probably die by the age of twenty-five.

“What are you talking about?” Keisha asked. “That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“My big mouth is gonna get me in trouble. I know it.”

Tupac settled into the normalcy of this new relationship. He had found a girl who not only enjoyed her time working as a camp counselor but who also spent much of her time studying for her college degree. Time with Keisha may have been a refreshing break from the entertainment industry, moments of calm in the whirlwind of fame. As the days went on, Tupac found himself enjoying his time with Keisha so much that the next time he visited his family in Atlanta she flew back with him. During this trip, they went shopping for groceries and kicked back around the house for most of the day until it was time to leave for one of his performances. When they returned late that night, he stopped her at the front door.

“Wait,” he said. He picked her up and carried her through the doorway. “This is how I’m gonna carry you over the threshold when we get married,” he said.

That night Tupac’s efforts to be romantic went horribly wrong. The candles he lit on the nightstand accidently set his pillow on fire while he and Keisha slept. They woke up from the heat and scrambled in panic. Keisha ran out of the room while Tupac doused the fire with a glass of soda. Later that night, he teased her for jumping out of the bed and leaving him in the room alone.

“I can’t believe you just left me by myself. You should have stayed with me,” Tupac said.

“The bed was on fire!” she said laughing.

“Yeah, but we could’ve burned *together,*” Tupac said.

That September, he bought Keisha a ring. And a puppy. The dog, a cocker spaniel, was to keep her company when he traveled, he said. The ring was a gesture that he wanted to marry her. He pulled out the red velvet ring box and put it in the puppy’s mouth. Keisha took the box from the dog and opened it. She was speechless. It was an antique platinum ring shaped like a crown that contained forty-two sparkling diamonds.

There was no proposal. No bended knee. Just a simple directive from Tupac: “We’re gonna get married around your birthday.”

Keisha was both stunned and excited at the proposition. She recalls, “We met in June. He bought me the ring in September, and we were getting married in November.”

During those months, as Tupac continued to spend much of his time in the air, flying back and forth from Los Angeles to New York, the engaged couple tried to spend as much time together as they could. While in New York, Tupac traded in his hotel key and instead stayed with Keisha at her apartment. Some nights the two went to dinner or a movie, or even a musical. One weekend, Tupac bought tickets for them to see one of his favorites, *Les Misérables,* not once but twice. Keisha recalls, “I hated it. I was like, ‘Tupac, you cannot be serious. Out of all the plays on Broadway you wanna take me to see this?’ ”

Tupac made no bones about his love for the show. “Yes, this is a powerful love story,” he replied. Keisha was always surprised by the complex layers of his personality. Each time he opened his mouth he surprised her with something new.

Tupac spent mornings at Keisha’s apartment in the bathroom, ever his office, scribbling in a notebook as the puppy nipped at his toes. When he emerged from his long writing sessions, sometimes he’d be greeted by Keisha making breakfast in the kitchen. He liked his eggs sunny-side up, fried hard, with bacon and grits. For dinner he liked to have barbecued chicken and macaroni and cheese. Some evenings, as she prepared dinner, he would push her aside and say, “Okay, move out of the way, you’ve done enough. Let me finish.” Tupac loved to cook, and since he’d become comfortable at Keisha’s place, her kitchen became his laboratory.

Their time together was a respite from the chaos of the outside world and the uncertainty in his life. They never talked about his television interviews or the media scandals. They never even discussed his court cases. Instead, they just kicked back on the couch, enjoying each other’s company, dreaming about their future together. Some nights, as the Harlem air blew through the windows, Tupac was reminded of his childhood as they lay together in silence.

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That fall, Tupac stepped onto the set of his fourth movie, the crime drama *Bullet*. Cast as an eye patch–wearing drug dealer named Tank, he would be co-starring with Mickey Rourke, Adrien Brody, and Donnie Wahlberg and working under the direction of famous music video director Julien Temple. As usual it didn't take long for Tupac to form new friendships. His connection with Rourke, in particular, was instantaneous. "Tupac and I are both from the streets," Rourke said of their friendship. "We were either gonna get along or it was gonna be on. We just clicked." During the film's production, the two shared a suite at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. Together, they took advantage of the New York nightlife, trashing their hotel (to the point where Rourke was sued), and frequenting bars, across the city. Rourke remembered that they developed quite a reputation. "We'd be crossing the street to go to a club," he said, "and you'd already hear the bouncers say, 'They're here together, what are we supposed to do?' "

"I did take him downtown and introduced him to John Gotti. He really liked that," Rourke recalled years later, when time had given him more perspective. "Neither one of us should really have been associating in that element."

By the end of 1994, the daily newspapers Tupac read started to feature more and more stories about him. Recently, his lyrics had once again caused controversy. Just as had happened in the Texas state trooper incident, his lyrics were cited as criminal inspiration during the trial of two teens in Milwaukee who had killed a police officer. Tupac hired Chokwe Lumumba, Afeni's friend and the man who tried to steer him toward the path of the New Afrikan Panthers, as his attorney, and Chokwe gave a comment in the *Los Angeles Times*: "Tupac is an artist, and his work is social commentary. It's unfortunate when anybody is killed, but Tupac has never told anybody to shoot a policeman. It's true that he raps about problems with the police, but those problems existed long before he was even born."

As the start date of Tupac's highly publicized trial approached, the story followed him everywhere he went. One night at a comedy club in New

York, a female comedian saw him in the club and cracked a few jokes about the case. Though he was hurt by the jokes, Tupac maintained his composure, laughed it off, and patiently waited for her to move on. “He always maintained not only his innocence but he maintained his cool,” Tupac’s cousin Bill recalls. But it all took a toll. “That was a very turbulent time for all of us.”

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LETTER 2 MY UNBORN

1994

> Tell the world I plead guilty to being anxious.
> Ain't no way in hell that I could ever be a rapist.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

On November 29, 1994, Tupac sat quietly in a courtroom at the New York State Supreme Court, housed in the same set of buildings where, more than twenty years before, Afeni, pregnant with Tupac, had fought for an acquittal and for her life and the life of her unborn son. Tupac was accused of a crime he adamantly denied. He suspected the U.S. government might somehow be involved again. "I feel like somebody's setting me up because I'm Tupac Shakur. My mother was a Panther. It's based on what they did and what I'm doing," Tupac told *Vibe* journalist Kevin Powell.

Afeni was more concerned about his freedom. Over the course of her life, she had wished to keep her son out of prison at all costs. She set the bar high when she represented herself in court, trusting only in herself to achieve a not-guilty verdict. Now she had to find an attorney who would fight for her son and ensure the same outcome. With a referral from Mutulu and Chokwe, she hired Michael Warren, who had made a successful legal career defending high-profile cases, including those of several of her Black Panther friends and associates. Warren had represented Mutulu in his parole hearings and, notably, eight years later had been the lead attorney in the case to exonerate the Central Park Five, the group of young men falsely accused of rape and assault of a white woman in Central Park in 1989.

Warren's team included his co-counsel, a female defense attorney named Iris Crews, who, years before as a law student, had helped with Mutulu's defense. Crews told Warren she wanted to meet Tupac before she committed to the case because she wouldn't represent anyone she didn't believe in. They met at the River Café in Brooklyn. “We talked about the young lady. We talked about the incident,” Crews recounted. “He told me what happened, and more importantly, he showed me the respect I needed to continue on with the case, ’cause I had to be able to look in his eyes and believe this young man. I had to listen to his voice and believe this young man. He opened the door for me. He pulled out my chair. I didn’t get the bravado stuff. I didn’t get all of that cursing. I got a very different person. And I learned he was somebody quite different than the person shown on TV. He was afraid. He was hurt. He thought he had been betrayed and he said to me, ‘I respect women, and for someone to do this to me, to set me up like this…’ It hurt him. It truly hurt him.”

Warren and Crews knew they had their work cut out for them when they learned that Justice Daniel P. Fitzgerald would be presiding. Fitzgerald was a close associate of New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, whose politics couldn’t have been more different from Tupac’s. “Fitzgerald was a puppet who was controlled by Giuliani,” Warren said, “the ventriloquist who was pulling the strings in the background.”

Throughout the trial, Tupac stayed quiet. He listened to the daily proceedings while continuously writing on a legal pad. He wrote lyrics, track lists, and poems. He even handwrote a ninety-nine-page screenplay entitled *Dayroom 12,* scribbling out the title and changing it to *Shadow of Doubt* and then *Manchild*. The protagonist is Karlo “Kane” Parker, “a successful rapper at the peak of his career,” who is “set up for a crime he didn’t commit.”

On the last page of the story, Karlo is found not guilty and runs off into the sunset with his love interest, “Karen.” The end credits note that the main character ended up still working “in the entertainment field, not as a rapper, but as a writer.”

Iris Crews wondered what Tupac was writing every day as he sat there beside her. “One day he’s writing poetry of Robert Frost’s,” she recalled. “I looked at what he was writing and said, ‘Give me this.’ ” Crews looked at the paper. On the hundredth page of his notebook was “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” which Tupac had titled “Nothing Gold.”

Outside the courtroom, he wasn't as quiet. Some days, after court was adjourned, Tupac pleaded his own case with the press on the sidewalk. As he stood huddled inside a small army of reporters, microphones in his face, he framed the trial as an attack not just on him but on the broader community. "What they think is that I represent lawlessness and the outlaw mentality and I represent that thug mentality from the street," he said. "So they feel like if they can punish me, then it'll punish people who are not as brave as I am, who don't speak out against things like me."

He continued, "Thirty charges and none of them have to do with me." One reporter asked why Tupac's accuser would make up her story. Tupac responded with conviction, "I'm guilty of a lot of things. I'm guilty probably of being a male chauvinist pig. I'm guilty of probably not caring as much as I should. I'm guilty of not spending enough time with people like I should. But I'm not guilty of rape."

He wrapped up his sidewalk testimony with "All I do is make raps! All I do is rap and talk loud. My biggest crime is talking loud….Y'all don't have nothing else besides that."

—

On November 30, as the trial drew to a close and the jury deliberations began, Tupac, family friend Zayd, Stretch, and another friend, Freddie "Nickels" Moore, headed to the Harlem studio of local DJ Ron G to record a song called "Deadly Combination" for Harlem-born rap artist Big L. During the session, Tupac received a page from Jimmy Henchman of Henchmen Entertainment, whom he'd met through Jacques Agnant. Henchman, known as "Booker," asked Tupac if he wanted to record a verse for one of his clients, Little Shawn, a recording artist who was signed to Bad Boy Records. Tupac negotiated a $7,000 fee and headed over to Quad Studios in Times Square to cut the verse.

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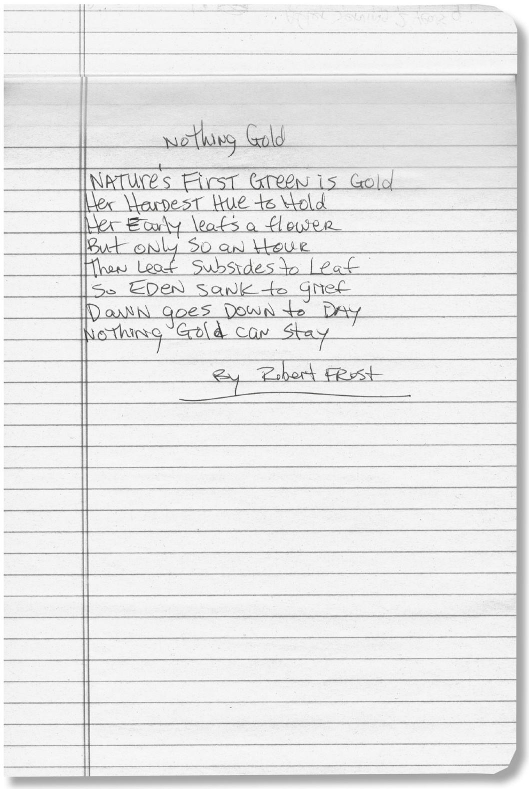

Nothing Gold

Nature's First Green is Gold
Her Hardest Hue to Hold
Her Early leaf's a flower
But only So an Hour
Then Leaf Subsides to Leaf
So Eden sank to grief
Dawn goes Down to Day
Nothing Gold can Stay

By Robert Frost

While on trial, Tupac would sometimes write in his notebook. On one of the pages, he wrote out Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay."

Click here to view text

When Tupac and his crew arrived at Quad at 12:25 A.M., a familiar voice greeted him from a window above. It was rapper Lil' Cease, a close friend of Biggie's. On the way in, Tupac, always vigilant, noticed a man in camouflage hanging by the door. "When we walked to the door, he didn't look up," Tupac recalled. "I've never seen a Black man not acknowledge me one way or the other, either with jealousy or respect. But this guy just looked to see who I was and turned his face down. It didn't click, 'cause I had just finished smoking chronic. I'm not thinking something will happen to me in the lobby."

Once inside, they passed the security guard's post and stepped into a small area to wait for the elevator. Suddenly, two young Black men came from behind yelling, "Y'all niggas lay down!" They aimed the barrels of their guns straight at Tupac, Freddie, Zayd, and Stretch, and then yelled, “Take off your jewelry!”

Tupac didn’t lie down. Instead, he turned around quickly to face the men. One of them tried to grab his arm. Tupac snatched his arm back. “There wasn’t no fear in his eyes,” Zayd recalled.

As Tupac lunged for the gun aimed at him, he simultaneously reached for one of his own.

One of the robbers yelled, “GUN!”

The assailant pulled the trigger and a flurry of gunfire erupted. The next thing Zayd remembered hearing was Tupac’s boots clacking together as he hit the floor. “Two bullets went up under his skin,” Zayd recalled. “You could see the entry holes. And then you can see the two lines riding parallel, to the back of his head where the bullets rolled across his scalp. They hit him in the head and they hit him in the fuckin’ hand….Him getting shot in the head caused him to pull the trigger.” While bullets penetrated Tupac at various places on his body, the question of which gun fired which bullet has never been answered. Tupac believed he was shot five times by the assailants.

“They were stomping my head against the concrete,” Tupac remembered. “I saw white, just white.”

One of the attackers kept his gun aimed at Stretch, Zayd, and Freddie as they lay on the floor, while the other stripped Tupac of one of his two guns and approximately $40,000 worth of diamonds and gold jewelry. Before the men took off, they pistol-whipped Tupac and kicked him in the head.

As Tupac lay on the floor, Zayd called to him, “Yo, are you all right?”

“I’m hit,” he managed to say.

Zayd grabbed Tupac’s remaining gun and ran outside after the men. Tupac stood up, wounded and bleeding, and followed him outside. They tried to find the two men who robbed them, but to no avail. Moments later, they took the elevator to the eighth floor. Tupac limped into the studio, blood seeping from his head and body. Dozens of people were present, including Biggie, Puffy, and Uptown Records president Andre Harrell.

Tupac found a phone and called Keisha so that she could tell his mother. Then he called 911.

The paramedics and police arrived quickly. Tupac noticed that the officers were the same ones who showed up on the scene at the Parker Meridien the night he was arrested. One of them had just testified against him in the trial. Paramedics attended to his wounds, strapped him to a stretcher, and carried him out of the building through a throng of press photographers who greeted his emergence with a frenzy. Outraged, Tupac defiantly flipped them his middle finger as he was loaded into the ambulance. "I can't believe you're taking my picture on a stretcher!"

As they lifted Tupac into the ambulance, the cops stood close, noticing the paramedics tending to his crotch. Tupac later recalled that one of them "had half a smile on his face and he could see them looking at my balls. He said, 'What's up, Tupac? How's it hanging?' "

Just then Man-Man arrived, alerted by pager about the incident. He jumped in the ambulance with Tupac. As the two made their way to the hospital, Keisha grabbed a taxi and rushed to the Bronx apartment of Tupac's cousin Jamala, where Afeni and Aunt Glo were staying while in town for the trial. Keisha only knew the street address, not the apartment number, and Jamala didn't have a phone. With no other options, Keisha stood in front of the building and yelled, "Jamala! Tupac's been shot! Tupac's been shot!" Fortunately, Glo heard her and came to a window.

"He's at Bellevue!" she yelled up to them.

Afeni, Aunt Jean, and Keisha rushed to Bellevue Hospital, where medical staff gave them an update and let them know that Tupac was still in surgery. After hours in the waiting room, the doctors informed them that Tupac was in recovery. But just moments later he was taken back into the OR so that the doctor could repair a blood vessel in his leg that would not stop bleeding.

At four P.M. the next day, press and fans started to show up at the hospital as the world started to learn that Tupac Shakur had been shot. When Tupac woke up from the anesthesia, still groggy and covered with bandages, Afeni went in first to see him, followed by Glo. Tupac turned to them, saying, “Look what they did to me.” Afeni quickly sorted her emotions, returned to the waiting room, and started to manage the growing crowd of visitors. Watani secured the premises, ordering an additional level of security, private guards from X-Men Security Company, staffed by former members of the Nation of Islam.

Amid the chaos and the urgent chatter in the waiting room about what had happened and who was responsible, Glo noticed Biggie alone, apart from the crowd. “He looked sad,” she remembered. “He wasn’t standing with the rest of the people trying to see Tupac. He was by himself standing up against the wall.” Then Afeni noticed that Billy Garland, the man she knew to be Tupac’s biological father, had appeared. He was suddenly, after many years, eager to see his son.

As the gatekeeper, the person who determined who would be allowed to get past the waiting room and in to see her son, Afeni had to make a quick decision. “She was so overwhelmed,” Glo recalled. “It was mayhem in that hospital that day, and she tried to figure out what the right thing was to do at that moment.” Whether it was an emotional decision or a rational one, Afeni agreed to let him go in.

Standing by Tupac’s bedside, Keisha delivered the news. “There’s a man in the waiting room that says he’s your father.”

“What?”

“And he looks just like you.”

Moments later, an oddly familiar face appeared beside him. “You all right, man?”

Tupac stared up at Billy Garland. He had met Billy before, when Afeni took him to visit as a toddler, but because Billy had his own family and didn’t seem interested then in carrying on a father-son relationship, Afeni had pivoted and let Legs, the man who passionately claimed Tupac as his son, fill the role. The day Legs appeared and stood over Tupac’s crib and said, “Yeah, he’s mine”—that was all Afeni needed to hear. Legs *wanted* Tupac to be his son and was excited about being his father, even if he wasn’t the most available father. After Legs died, Tupac had never really stopped grieving for him.

And now nine years later, with no memory of his toddler visits with Billy, the man standing over him was just a stranger, his claim of fatherhood adding to the aftershock of everything Tupac had just experienced. But the resemblance was surreal. Glo recalled, “He told us when he looked up, he thought he had died because he was looking at someone who looked just like him. He was thinkin’ *Am I in heaven? Did I die?*”

Even with a set of private security guards standing vigilant outside the hospital room door, it became impossible for Tupac to relax. A visit from a man claiming he was his father compounded the urgent fears that he would be ambushed again. Tupac’s mind felt like a tangled web of paranoia, pain, and confusion. His stress levels reached a boiling point. He needed to get out of that bed. He needed to smoke a blunt. Or a cigarette. Something, anything to clear his head.

Still under partial sedation, he got up and headed out of the room. One of the security guards must have sensed Tupac’s desperation, and instead of trying to get him back to bed, he helped him down the elevator to the waiting room so he could find his mother.

Less than three hours after coming out of surgery, fueled by adrenaline and anxiety, Tupac walked into the waiting room in his hospital gown, a coat, and shoes. His head, arm, and leg were wrapped with gauze and he dragged the IV pole behind him. Afeni was talking with Jamal Joseph, who had just arrived, when she looked up and saw him.

“Where are you going?” she asked Tupac calmly.

He started pleading with her, convinced that if he didn’t leave the hospital that instant, his life would be in danger. “Get me out of here now.” His eyes were wide with fear.

Asking no further questions, Glo ran out of the hospital for the car while Afeni found a wheelchair. Before they could make it out the door, a hospital security guard intervened. “You can’t go,” he said.

Jamal knew that no one was going to change Tupac’s mind. He took the security guard aside and spoke quietly so the rest of the waiting room wouldn’t hear them. “Look around you,” he said. “There are about ten street soldiers here. There are ex-Panthers, people from the Nation of Islam. I recommend you show us not only the papers to sign but also the back way out.”

Afeni was scared about the rash decision her son had just made, but she also felt it was important to support him in this moment of fear and uncertainty. She wheeled Tupac out of the hospital. It was 6:45 P.M. Not even twenty-four hours had passed since the shooting.

As they left the hospital, they were swarmed by reporters, fans, and photographers who had found the back exit. Pushing his way through the crowd was Mickey Rourke, who had jumped on a plane from Miami the moment he heard Tupac was shot and made it to the hospital just as Tupac was leaving. As they made their way to Keisha’s apartment in Harlem, the hospital trauma surgeon, Dr. Pachter, learned that Tupac had checked himself out. He told reporters, “I haven’t seen anybody in my twenty-five-year professional career leave the hospital like this.”

Afeni and Watani hired a private doctor to tend to Tupac while he hid away at Keisha’s apartment. After stabilizing him, the doctor explained to Keisha the details of Tupac’s care. He told her what to look out for and cautioned her about specific signs that should prompt her to call him right away. As he spoke, Tupac nudged Keisha and said, “You’re not paying attention!”

“I am paying attention, Tupac.”

“No, you’re not. Listen to the doctor.”

“I’ve been up for forty-eight hours, Tupac.”

“And I’ve just been shot!”

After the doctor left, Keisha noticed that Tupac’s leg continued to bleed. She called Afeni and Watani, who were able to coax him back to the hospital later that day, checking him in under the alias “Bob Day.” From Tupac’s hospital bed, he and Keisha watched TV. A report about the shooting and his trial was the lead story on the eleven o’clock news. And of course, after the news, the late-night talk-show hosts chimed in as well. Between the news and the heckling from comedians, Tupac grew frustrated.

As he tried to relax in his hospital bed, the phone started to ring. Since they’d checked in under an alias, Tupac figured it must be a family member, but when he answered the phone, he was met with an unfamiliar, mocking voice: *“You ain’t dead yet.*”

Tupac slammed the phone down. He needed to find a place where absolutely no one could find him. It was time to cut everyone he didn’t trust out of his life. He was done with casual associates, believing that everyone who was at Quad Studios that night knew who robbed and shot him. And since Biggie was there, Tupac believed he knew too. Tupac suspected Jacques Agnant of setting him up in the sexual-abuse case and of being involved in his shooting, though Agnant denied all of it. Tupac even ended his friendship with close friend Stretch because he felt that Stretch should have done more to protect him from the attack.

On December 1, just forty-eight hours after being shot, Tupac returned to the courtroom in a wheelchair with a bandage wrapped around his head covered by a New York Yankees ball cap. The jury had returned to deliver its verdict. Today he would learn his fate. But after lunch, Warren alerted the court that Tupac’s wounded leg was numb and he would be heading back to the hospital. He would not be in the room at the time the verdict was delivered.

When the jurors entered the courtroom, Justice Fitzgerald asked the jury for their decision. “What say you on count one?”

Jury Foreman: “Not guilty” for count one, attempted sodomy.

“Count two?”

“Not guilty” for sodomy.

“Count three?”

“Not guilty” for sodomy.

“Not guilty” for three counts of weapons possession.

On the counts of sexual abuse in the first degree the jury voted “guilty.”

Tupac had been vociferous in his insistence that he had not raped or sodomized anyone, and ultimately, he was found not guilty on those charges. The guilty verdict on the sexual-abuse charge was more specific: “forcibly touching the buttocks.”

After the verdict, Tupac’s codefendant, Man-Man, was immediately ushered away and jailed pending his sentencing date. Tupac would continue to remain free; due to his medical condition, the judge granted him extra time to heal until his court-imposed deadline to return to jail, which ultimately was extended until December 24.

During that three-week period, because of the family's overwhelming fears that someone would again try to harm Tupac, Afeni knew she had to hide her son. But the media circus made it harder by the day.

Tupac thought of Jasmine Guy. She'd been coming every day to support him in court and had become one of his most loyal friends. Tupac thought he might be able to concentrate on his physical recuperation at her home, without being pestered by the press or worrying about anyone finding him. "There was no [other] sanctuary for him," Jasmine remembered. "He had all those holes in his body. It was just a horrific time to be dealing with the outside world, especially since he was supposed to be in the hospital." She took him in without hesitation, opening up her Manhattan brownstone to him and his family. "He was trying to deal with the betrayal of who shot him and who his real friends were. It was driving him nuts."

Sitting on Jasmine's couch for days on end, depressed and despairing, anguished at being convicted for a crime he steadfastly denied committing, Tupac reached a breaking point. One afternoon, when Afeni, Glo, and family friend Louisa came to check on him, they were met with the unthinkable. They entered Jasmine's home and peered through the darkness as they walked farther into the living room. They were shocked to find Tupac sitting on the couch, in the dark, a shotgun in one hand and a .45 millimeter in the other. Across his forehead was written in black marker FUCK THE WORLD. "There was a force around him," Glo explained. "I have seen a demon as if it was on his shoulder. Tupac was so depressed."

The three of them moved quietly into the back room to catch their breath.

Moments later, Afeni walked back into the living room and knelt before her only son.

She asked Tupac to be strong and told him he was needed to "fight for the good in this world."

It was a high-stakes conversation, and later Afeni would recall just how pivotal it had been. “That was the day that I sat and talked my son into life.”

The next day, Katari, Yaki, Malcolm, Mutah, Glo, and Yaasmyn were all there. Still agonizing, Tupac talked to them as he sat on the couch and laid out a horrifying request for them.

Tupac *had* planned it all out in macabre detail. He wanted them to drive him to the woods, where he would share one last blunt with Yaki, Mutah, Katari, and Malcolm. Then they would leave him there with his shotgun. “And when it happens,” Tupac said, “don’t let them touch my body. I don’t want them touchin’ my body. Y’all take my body.”

Anxiously, they listened to his plea. He did not whine. He did not cry. He sat in the center of the couch, despondent. His only other options, he said, were to flee or turn himself in. He feared that fleeing would put them all in danger, which was the last thing he wanted to do. He was particularly concerned for his Bronx-based cousin Jamala and her young daughter, Imani. If he ran, he thought, the police would kick her door down first. The authorities would harass his family until someone was hurt. But if he took his own life, that would be the end of it. There would be no manhunt, no questions. It would be over. “It was like he was directing a movie. He was not morbid at all,” Glo recalled of Tupac detailing this plan for the group. “He told us to tell Mutulu that ‘one of us got away.’ ”

He asked each of them to pledge their help. Nobody said a word. They all stared at him blankly, wearing expressions of disbelief. Yaasmyn stood her ground and adamantly shook her head. Glo ran to the bathroom and shut the door. “It was a very painful time for all of us,” she recalled. “It was surreal. We under no circumstances agreed with my nephew, but we were trying to get through the fucking moment.”

Tupac ignored all attempts from his family to dissuade him from his plan. Later, he reflected on the moment, and the toll that the trial had taken on his soul. “I just all around felt suicidal. But I couldn’t kill myself. I just wanted somebody to kill me for me.”

By week’s end, word had gotten out that Tupac was hiding out at Jasmine’s home. The phone started ringing nonstop and the doorbell buzzed constantly. Family and friends started to drop by unannounced, flooding the small space inside Jasmine's brownstone. Karen Lee, who was asked by Interscope to return to Tupac's team to help with public relations related to the trial, called Tupac to ask if it was okay to bring Billy Garland over to see him. She had known Garland for years and knew that he was eager to forge a father-son relationship. Even though he was still trying to process the reality that his father was still alive, Tupac agreed to have Billy come visit him. But after hours of sitting with Billy, Tupac became overwhelmed by his presence. "He called me," Karen recalled. "He said, 'You promised me you weren't gonna leave him here. You know he just wants to sit up here and drink wine and smoke weed. I got plenty niggas to sip wine and smoke weed with me.' " Karen surmised, "I think Tupac was looking for that father thing, which is what he always got from Mutulu." The disquieting realization that he wasn't going to get it from Billy Garland added to the harsh realities of everything happening in Tupac's life at that time.

After two weeks at Jasmine's brownstone, it was time for Tupac to relocate. While his family packed up his things, Tupac asked Jasmine if he could borrow one of her wigs to disguise himself as he ventured out onto the New York City sidewalks.

Tupac stepped outside and was immediately greeted by the cold East Coast chill. He refused a cab; after being stuck indoors for so long, he decided to walk and feel the outdoors and the icy snow crunching beneath his feet. He used his rifle as a cane and hobbled almost five blocks, down the streets of Manhattan to his next safe house: Hotel Esplanade, a residence hotel on Seventy-Fourth and West End Avenue. Then he called Keisha.

"Can you come cook for me? Tacos?" he asked.

She came right away, cooking while Tupac listened to Mary J. Blige's CD *My Life* on repeat. He stayed awake into the night, trying to find a way out of turning himself in to the authorities.

While Tupac continued to look for options, close friends Jada and Jasmine pooled money for his bail. But he was still far short of what he needed. The court had set bail at an outlandish $3 million.

On December 23, the day before Tupac was supposed to turn himself in to the prison ward at Bellevue, he continued to resist. “Fuck it, I’m not going,” he told his family. Karen Lee tried explaining to Tupac that if he didn’t surrender, he’d become a fugitive. The law would come after him and everyone who knew him. Eventually, his attorneys, Iris Crews and Michael Warren, arrived at Tupac’s hotel with a plan to convince him. Over the course of the trial, Iris and Tupac had bonded over many shared lunches as they sat next to each other in court. Iris believed that if she could get a few minutes with him, because of how close they had grown, she could convince him how important it was to turn himself in. Iris later remembered the thoughts going through her mind as she arrived at the Esplanade that day: “I hoped the Creator was going to give me the right words to say to help this young brotha out.”

When they were alone in the room together, she said to him, quietly, “Tupac, we’re gonna do this. All of us are gonna do this together.”

Tupac responded, “Look what happened to Mutulu. I’m not gonna let that happen to me.”

“We’re gonna watch out for you.”

“Naw, I’m not. I’m not gonna spend the rest of my life in jail. I’m not gonna do it.”

Iris let him talk. When he ran out of words, she hugged him. “Somehow holding him and talking to him…all of this comes from two months of him trusting me…made him say ‘All right, I’ll do it. I’ll do it,’ ” Iris recalled.

Hours later, on December 24, at two in the morning, to avoid the press and the expected crowds, Tupac finally turned himself in. He, along with his family and his attorneys, arrived at Bellevue Hospital’s prison ward, where he would continue to recover under the care of doctors and await his upcoming sentencing date.

As Christmas passed and the New Year approached, Afeni and Glo spent long days in the lobby at the hospital prison ward, greeting the steady stream of guests who came to lend their support. When Jamal Joseph came to visit, Tupac met him in the visiting room, dressed in a hospital gown and escorted by prison guards. Their conversation quickly landed on the status of Tupac's Thug Life project. Over the years, Jamal, Watani, and Mutulu had all discussed the overall mission, path, and purpose of Thug Life with Tupac. All three of them came from political backgrounds. They each swore by the pillars and themes of Black power and pride. But Jamal wanted to discuss it further, hoping to understand Tupac's vision going forward. Jamal explained, "He liked to go back and forth about Thug Life with me because we never quite agreed on it."

But as soon as Jamal brought up Thug Life at Bellevue, Tupac cut him off. "Jamal, before you even start in on me, just let me say something," he said. "I wanna tell you about this kid that they brought in the hospital here the other day. Can you believe what this kid said to me?"

"No, what did he say?"

"He said, 'Tupac, you're my hero. Man, I can't believe it's you.' I said to him, 'Wait a minute, man. Why am I your hero?' He said, 'You be gettin' all the girls, you be shootin' at the police….' And I told him, 'If that's why I'm your hero, then I don't need to be anyone's damn hero.' And Uncle Jamal, I knew at that moment that this 'Thug Life' thing needs to be dead. It's over."

"I've been telling you that it needed to be dead long ago."

"But I was high then. I'm clear now."

"Good."

"And since I'm gonna die anyway, it needs to—"

Jamal interrupted, "Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because I'm a Shakur."

"Tupac, you're not gonna die."

"I am gonna die. And I know I'd rather go out like Malcolm than go out like a thug."

And just like that, his Thug Life movement was behind him, history. In an interview after he left Bellevue, Tupac reflected on the end of Thug Life: "A lot of people have been giving me mad flack about this Thug Life thing. I've been getting the blame for everything that Thug Life ever did. Anybody can say 'Thug Life,' and it always comes back to me….Policemen get killed, and I get blamed for it. All type of violence and I get blamed for it. I didn't create 'Thug Life.' I diagnosed it."

On February 7, 1995, Tupac appeared before Justice Fitzgerald for sentencing. The courthouse was packed with family members, close friends, and loyal fans, all hoping that their overwhelming presence would lend support on the most challenging day of Tupac's life and convey to the court that they wholeheartedly *believed* Tupac. They wanted to show that they loved him and respected him as a valued member of society.

When the judge asked him if he had anything to say, Tupac, with tears in his eyes, spoke modestly and humbly first apologizing to Ayanna. But he wanted to make it clear that he wasn't apologizing for the crimes that he was charged with. He apologized that it had to be handled in a courtroom. He continued and addressed her with, "I hope in time you come forth and tell the truth—I am innocent."

He expressed his faith in God and shared an apology filled with regret for Man-Man, sentenced to one and a half to four and a half months in jail and five years' probation; Man-Man, the loyal friend who had supported him financially when Tupac had nothing and then with his presence for years after. Tupac told the judge that his intention was to take his friend *away* from the streets and out of "the game," not get him into legal trouble. He ended with a direct message to Judge Fitzgerald. "I mean this with no disrespect, Judge—but you never paid attention to me; you never looked me in the eyes. You never used the wisdom of Solomon. I always felt like you had something against me. I got so involved in my career that I didn't see this coming. I have no shame. I don't feel shame. I leave this case in the hands of God."

Tupac's words left an uncanny silence in the courtroom. "You could cut the tension in the courtroom with a knife," Shock G recalled. "It moved the whole side of the prosecution. Everybody's eyes in the courtroom watered up." Including Tupac's. "He was almost crying," Michael Warren recalled. "Because he didn't do it….He was genuinely hurt because of that. If he had to do thirty-five years for something else other than the sex charges, he'd do it as long as he didn’t get convicted of any sex charges. He was a young, principled brother.”

Justice Fitzgerald sentenced Tupac to one and a half to four and a half years in prison. The sentence struck Michael Warren as unduly harsh. “With the counts he was convicted of, he should have been given probation,” he noted. “Class C felonies. Those are the lowest felonies you could be convicted of. And probation is almost automatic.”

Atron explained, “In New York, what Tupac was convicted of is a felony, but in California, it’s a misdemeanor; he would have walked. From what I understand, the jurors just thought he was going to walk. And the judge threw the book at him. And they sent him to the worst state prison in New York.”

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IT AIN'T EASY

1995

> Even though you innocent you still a nigga, so they figure.
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

After the sentence was handed down, authorities transported Tupac and Man-Man to Rikers Island Penitentiary, where they would be held temporarily. "They took us straight from court," Man-Man recounted. "They put us in protective custody, in with people they had to get out of [the] regular population because they stabbed or shanked people or whatever. But they put us in there with all them. There were about thirty beds for these prisoners on the floor. And they had Pac in a cell by himself because he was a celebrity. They wouldn't let anyone go near his cell. I could roam around on the floor, but they only let him come out an hour a day. He hated that."

Weeks later, Tupac was taken to Downstate Correctional Facility in Fishkill, New York, for an assessment with the Department of Corrections, who would review his case, his psychological factors and personal background, and determine which facility he would be assigned to for his sentence. Ultimately, the classification committee designated him as a "medium security" case, but the Department of Corrections assigned him to a maximum-security facility. Later, Michael Warren would lament, "The real tragedy is that they sent him to a maximum-security prison. He should *not* have been sent to a maximum-security prison."

In March, a prison bus took Tupac to Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York, the state prison where the "Son of Sam" serial killer, David Berkowitz, served time; where Charles "Lucky" Luciano, the famed mobster of the Genovese crime family spent many years; and where

Robert Chambers, the “Preppie Killer,” was sentenced for strangling a woman to death in Central Park. Clinton was home to the twenty-five-to-lifers. “It was [the place] where all the assholes were at,” Syke recalls.

Upon his arrival at Clinton, Tupac’s celebrity status quickly proved both a blessing and a curse. His fellow inmates treated him with the utmost respect. Tupac remembered the welcome he received on the first day of lockup. “In two hours, I had everything I needed,” he recalled. “Niggas brought me toothpaste, toothbrushes, a banger.” But because of his fame and the ongoing media coverage, Clinton authorities immediately classified him as a “central monitoring case,” which meant additional surveillance. They encouraged Tupac to voluntarily enter protective custody, but he vehemently refused, believing it would weaken his credibility among the other prisoners and create suspicions that he was an informant. In the end, it wasn’t his decision. Authorities disregarded his refusal and put him in the Involuntary Protective Custody Unit anyway.

While Tupac tried his best to acclimate to life in prison, Tom Whalley and Interscope’s marketing executive, Steve Berman, were busy in Los Angeles laying out the launch for the album Tupac had finally completed before he turned himself in. In this most unusual record-making process, Whalley, between hours on the phone and trips to Dannemora to sit in person with Tupac to review album artwork ideas, song choices, and release dates, did what he could to ensure the album’s success.

Berman was there to execute the plans that Whalley and Tupac put in place. Berman recalled the discussions about the fate of *Me Against the World*: “I remember being in the room and being in those conversations and thinking how easily it could have gone the other way. The guy’s in prison. Where’s it gonna go? Do we invest the money? All that. But it was just so clear that he was so important, and this album was so important, that we just gotta fight and push through. I remember those conversations with Tom and Jimmy just really like, ‘Let’s go.’ ”

Since Tupac was behind bars, he could not film music videos or give interviews to promote his album. There would be no television appearances on BET or *Yo! MTV Raps*. Interscope, Atron, and Tupac’s team of family and friends held ongoing conversations with him from his cell, plotting their moves. They discussed potential photos and artwork for the album cover and brainstormed ideas for content to use in music videos for the album's singles.

As these creative conversations unfolded, Afeni, Watani, Atron, and Yaasmyn Fula worked diligently, creating daily memos for Tupac on all legal matters, assuring him that lawyers were hard at work appealing his case. Once an appeal was granted, and the bail amount was met, Tupac would be free and the case would be retried. Until then, all he did was focus on the release of *Me Against the World* and how it would be received.

Berman put in long hours behind the scenes planning the album's distribution and launch. His strategy was to defy the standard rules of genre categorizing, push past the pigeonholes and "cultural gatekeepers," and get *Me Against the World* not just into urban markets but into as many stores in as many cities as he possibly could. When Berman started hearing affirmations from the most mainstream sales channels, in regions where hip-hop didn't normally sell or at chain stores that might have been expected to be put off by the controversy, he knew they had something huge. "I remember getting the phone call saying, 'Steve, K-Mart's coming for seventy-five thousand units,' " Berman recalled. "That was extraordinary. That was the moment that changed everything. That was the moment that I realized it was really in the culture, it was much more than what you thought rap music was. It was so much bigger than that. It was kids everywhere. It didn't matter where the kids grew up. They were relating and coming in the stores and looking for Tupac."

On April 1, 1995, during the depths of Tupac's darkest days, he woke in his cell to the incredible news that *Me Against the World* had debuted at number 1 on the *Billboard* charts. Never before had a singer, musician, band, or rap artist hit number 1 while incarcerated. And the cultural gatekeepers were completely on board. *Rolling Stone*'s Cheo Coker hailed it as his best album, "By and large a work of pain, anger and burning desperation…the first time [Tupac] has taken the conflicting forces tugging at his psyche head on." Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* wrote, "The album will surprise anyone expecting a tough guy’s most savage boasts…. *Me Against the World* revolves around memories and mourning.”

As “Dear Mama,” the album’s first single, spent five weeks at number 1 on the *Billboard* Hot Rap Singles chart and quickly entered constant rotation on radio station playlists across the country, CDs flew off the shelves, rocketing *Me Against the World* toward platinum status. It sold half a million copies in the first week alone. “I was beating dudes who my mama used to listen to,” Tupac said later. “Bruce Springsteen and all of them. I was like, ‘Damn. You know what this means?’ That made me feel good. That was the only revenge I really wanted.”

Yet with his massive career breakthrough finally achieved, there was little Tupac could do to celebrate. Being in jail meant that Tupac’s once-busy schedule came to a complete stop: No more all-nighters in the studio. No more movie sets. No more shows onstage in front of screaming fans. No more weed and no more women. All he could do was reflect on his decisions and analyze the past twenty-three years of his life. It was time to strategize for the next chapter.

The first order of business was to keep his word to Jamal Joseph—Thug Life would be no more. In a long interview he gave to Kevin Powell of *Vibe* magazine in January while at Rikers, waiting to be moved, he said, “Thug Life to me is dead. If it’s real, let somebody else represent it, because I’m tired of it. I represented it too much. I was Thug Life….I’m going to show people my true intentions, and my true heart. I’m going to show them the man that my mother raised. I’m going to make them all proud.”

His mind clear, Tupac resumed the voracious reading schedule he’d kept as a boy, devouring one or two books a day. “The first eight months I spent in solitude twenty-three hours a day locked down reading and writing,” he later noted in an interview. “I read a lot of Maya Angelou’s books. [I read] *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. I listened to music, different types of music to calm my soul. Dionne Farris got me through a lot of this stuff.”

He also found himself inspired by fractured work relationships of the past. In the *Vibe* magazine interview, after he publicly apologized to the Hughes brothers for the violent altercation, he expressed his frustration with director John Singleton at losing his role in the Columbia Pictures film *Higher Learning*. While he didn't offer the same apology he gave to the Hughes brothers and to Quincy Jones, he explained that Singleton inspired him to write screenplays and that since he "fired" him, he wanted "to be his competition." He began plotting out and writing summaries for several stories, one of which he completed in its entirety, a semiautobiographical story called *Live 2 Tell*. In the same interview with *Vibe,* Tupac explained, "It's…on my life, half me, half fiction." *Live 2 Tell* follows a young man named Scott Solomon who comes from a life of dysfunction and strife, becomes a drug dealer, and ends up serving time behind bars at Clinton Correctional. Scott harbors an unyielding love for the female lead, Carla James, a character he envisioned for Jada, whose role becomes one of the most pivotal parts of the film. He wrote out an entire wish list of actors he wanted to cast, which included Yo-Yo, Jamal Joseph, Jada Pinkett, Sean Nelson of Fresh, Freddie Foxxx, Jasmine Guy, Tony Danza, Mutah Beale, Katari Cox, Yafeu Fula, Anthony Cryss, Mopreme, Tyruss Himes, and Ricky Harris.

Then there were letters to his family and friends—a lot of them, all handwritten neatly with care. He wrote to Afeni and Glo, to Jamal, and to Mutulu, telling them about his life in prison. He also wrote long, sentimental letters to friends, thanking them for their support during his prison sentence. He received letters from celebrities—Jada, Madonna, Jasmine, Yo-Yo, Chuck D, and even Tony Danza, whom he had never actually met—and wrote back to them. Later, when he was released, Tupac spoke fondly of the letter he received from Tony. "That was one of the best letters I got the whole time. [He wrote] that he was a fan. That he liked the album. [Told me to] keep my head up and when I come out, come out stronger." These letters became his lifeline to the outside world.

Conversations over the phone were another lifeline. Many of his calls were to Keisha. "We were really truly friends," Keisha explains. "He told me everything." To make her commute to the prison easier, Keisha temporarily stayed in a hotel close to Clinton before renting an apartment, where she continued to help Tupac with some of his day-to-day tasks and errands. She made business calls for him from the hotel room and shopped for him daily, buying him CDs, new clothes from the Gap, books, and magazines.

Keisha was his anchor, rooted in a normal life that represented a different, and in some ways more appealing, world than the maelstrom he was caught up in. There were also practical, legal reasons that made it sensible for them to get married while he was in prison. “He wanted me to have the respect of being his wife, not his ‘girlfriend.’ He wanted people to take me seriously,” Keisha said. “Because I was calling all these people, he wanted me to have that respect. It wasn’t about conjugal visits, because we didn’t have any. I didn’t want any and he didn’t want any. It wasn’t about that. There was more to it.”

And so on April 29, 1995, after Keisha and Tupac went through a month of prenuptial counseling within the walls of Clinton, the two exchanged I-do’s. On the day of their wedding, Tupac’s cousin Bill and Keisha’s stepmother stood as their witnesses.

Tupac wore a collared button-down shirt, while Keisha dressed demurely in a cream-colored suit and pumps. The prison authorities assigned a female officiant to walk them through their vows. In good humor throughout the ceremony, Tupac cracked jokes and smiled. “With all my worldly possessions, I do thee endow,” he said. Then he looked at Keisha and whispered, “You’re not getting my pool table or my big-screen TV.”

The next day when Keisha came to visit him, Tupac couldn’t help but admire his wedding ring. He looked at her, smiled, and said, “I can’t believe I’m married.”

The two shared great joy, but always mixed with the strain that prison put on everything. “He was really happy,” Keisha recalled. “But we were under horrible circumstances. We had to make do with the situation at hand.”

—

Tupac continued to pass the time reading and writing from his cell while his team of lawyers, led by prominent Black attorney and Harvard professor Charles Ogletree—who said the case "reeked of impropriety" and deemed the sentence "out of line with the conviction"—fought his appeal in court and desperately worked to get him out of prison. "It was important that we had someone else [like Ogletree] oversee what [the other lawyers] were doing," said Atron. "He's brilliant. A brilliant brotha."

As Tupac drafted full-length screenplays and letters and read an endless number of books, he found it was easiest to concentrate on projects that didn't require a lot of creativity. "Prison kills your spirit. Straight-up. There is no creativity. There is none of that. It killed my spirit," he reflected in an interview after he was released. "I only recently started writing, besides the script. The script is just like flashing back to my old life, so it didn't really take too much for me to be inspired by. Now I just finished a couple tracks, but [jail] doesn't really inspire creativity."

Each day, Tupac's rapidly growing fan base provided further hope in an otherwise dark time. As *Me Against the World* continued to dominate the charts, listeners wanted to get to know the "mama" behind the lyrics of "Dear Mama." Afeni, now four years out of rehab and thriving, had fully stepped into the role of supporting her son's career. She gave interviews and used the publicity to rally fans around Tupac. When she was invited to appear on BET's *Teen Summit,* she encouraged viewers to send letters to "disrupt the prison." The subsequent amount of fan mail Tupac received was overwhelming—not necessarily for him, but for the staff at Clinton. The amount of mail that was delivered to his cell each day soon became a source of contention between Tupac and the correctional officers. They demanded that he throw away his mail after he read it, but Tupac refused. In an interview, Tupac described the contents of his fan mail: "Girls writing me, telling me I helped them. I got *at least* a thousand letters from females saying you helped me get through this, you helped me get through that, with 'Keep Ya Head Up.' "

Inside the walls of the prison, Tupac also found himself fighting for his privacy. He found that the guards often searched his cell when he was showering, and he documented his complaints in letters to the prison superintendent, both as a form of protest and as a hedge against the possibility of someone planting something in his cell. “I am bringing this to your attention because I have not received formal notification of my cell being searched and I believe something to be peculiar about this invasion of my privacy,” he wrote in late August. “I have had many problems in the past with contraband accusations and false charges of marijuana consumption. I am sending this information to you as well as my attorney as a safeguard in case of any unforeseen problems with something found in my cell.”

The COs retaliated by filing misbehavior reports about Tupac smoking weed in his cell and not keeping his living quarters “clean.” Tupac’s natural penchant for defiance caused ongoing contention between him and the prison staff. When Tupac angrily confronted a CO for what he saw as a refusal to let him shower, the CO wrote him up for “swinging [his] arms and stating in a loud violent manner, ‘Quit fucking with me, I want my shower.’ ” Another time, he was written up for giving an autograph to an inmate, a bizarre violation of the rule “Inmate shall not exchange personally owned articles without authorization.” Yet another report claimed that Tupac was smoking weed in his cell. “I’m lookin’ at the news, ‘Tupac just got caught for weed.’ I ain’t even got caught yet!” he later recounted. “I was like, ‘Hold up. Something’s wrong!’ It was funny, but not *funny*. It was very humiliating.”

News that Tupac had been placed in solitary confinement for being suspected of smoking weed prompted Afeni to quick action. She reached out to her Panther contacts and called an ally who had since been elected as an alderman in New York City. He told Afeni he would call the civil rights activist Rev. Al Sharpton to see if he could help.

Within days, Tupac and Sharpton met across a table in the Clinton Correctional Facility’s cafeteria. Over the course of two visits, and hours of conversation, Sharpton reminded him of how important it was to stay on good behavior so he could avoid isolation, and he urged Tupac to get his GED. During one of the visits, Tupac told the reverend that his cell was near an inmate named Joey Fama, who claimed he was in prison *because* of Sharpton. Fama had been convicted of the murder of Yusuf Hawkins in 1989 after Sharpton had helped organize a series of protest demonstrations through Bensonhurst, where the killing occurred. When Tupac heard about this tragic and brutal killing, years before, he wrote a poem to Hawkins's mother (which was published in his posthumous collection of poetry). Ironically, now he lived a few cells up from the suspected killer.

After the two spent a couple of hours together, Sharpton told Tupac, "You ain't nothing like your image on the news."

They laughed. "You ain't either," responded Tupac. "You should see how wild they got you!"

Thanks to Sharpton's advocacy, the staff at Clinton agreed to take Tupac out of isolation and return him to his cell in the Assessment and Program Preparation Unit with other inmates who were under extra protection due to celebrity status or heightened media attention.

Still hovering over everything during these long months of incarceration was an unresolved question: Who shot Tupac at Quad Studios, and why? When Tupac gave the interview to Kevin Powell for *Vibe* in January, he gave a blow-by-blow account that conveyed more suspicions of a setup. He said that he'd been skeptical of Jimmy "Booker" Henchman because of Henchman's connection to Jacques Agnant, by then persona non grata in Tupac's world. And when he made it upstairs after being shot and looked around, he told Powell, "It scared the shit out of me."

But even though Tupac couldn't fathom that Biggie, the same friend who used to sleep on his couch, was *directly* responsible, he also thought that even if Biggie didn't know who the shooter was at the time, there was no way that he hadn't soon found out. Then, just as Tupac arrived at Clinton and weeks before his *Vibe* interview was going to press, Biggie rereleased his mega hit "Big Poppa," with a new B-side titled "Who Shot Ya?" Tupac felt confident that this song was about him. First there was the lyrical reference to the West Coast, which he thought pointed directly at him. And then Biggie asked, plain and simple, "Who shot ya?" in the song itself.

Biggie heard rumblings that Tupac was angry. He denied all accusations that he'd written "Who Shot Ya?" about Tupac, claiming he'd recorded it long before that night in November. He'd come to the hospital to see him and even tried to make a trip to Dannemora to sit down with his friend inside the walls of Clinton, but to no avail. "Biggie was always concerned about Tupac," Watani recalled. "Biggie was hurt that Tupac thought he had something to do with it. He tried to get visitation rights to visit Tupac while he was at Clinton." But no matter how much Biggie tried to repair their friendship, the bond they'd built over the past year was broken. Tupac was convinced Biggie knew who shot him. He was done with Biggie.

And then, after Tupac's *Vibe* cover story and interview hit shelves across America in April, Biggie and Puffy broke their public silence in statements given to Fab 5 Freddy for another *Vibe* piece that appeared in August. Biggie refuted Tupac's claim that he'd had something to do with the shooting. He even tried to excuse Tupac for blaming him. "I don't know what he was trying to hide or if he was scared," he said. "I figured that with the shit he was talking in *Vibe,* he was just confused more than anything. You get shot and then you go to jail for something you ain't even do, that could twist a nigga's mind up." Biggie again adamantly denied that "Who Shot Ya?" was about Tupac.

But it was Puffy who stirred the controversy by jabbing Tupac about Thug Life: "I hope this Thug Life shit is really over," he told *Vibe*. "But on the real, if you gonna be a mutherfuckin' thug, you gots to live and die a thug. There ain't no jumpin' in and out of thuggism. If that's what you choose to do, you gots to go out like that."

This response infuriated Tupac. He felt disrespected. To hear what he felt was Puffy belittling his movement and questioning his authenticity in the process sent him over the edge.

Meanwhile, the possibility of Tupac getting released on bail pending his appeal still loomed. Justice Ernst H. Rosenberger of the appellate division of the State Supreme Court of New York set a new bail amount at $1.4 million, which sill represented a massive burden, given how much legal fees had already drained Tupac's bank account. In order for Tupac to be released from prison while his case was reviewed by the appellate division, he would need to come up with not only the bail money but also enough to cover legal fees for the team to fight through the appeals process.

But it was a sum that might be achieved by bringing together funds from a number of places. “Coming up with bail money wasn’t an easy task,” recalled Tom Whalley, “because all of his money was being used for legal fees. We were all trying to figure out how to get it done. Celebrities were talking about helping. Watani and Atron were working on it diligently every day.”

David Cohen, Interscope’s head of business affairs, worked not only on securing Tupac’s bail money but also on figuring out a strategy to address questions that would come from the media, in an effort to shield Interscope’s parent company, Time Warner, from negative publicity. “[Time Warner] wanted a really low profile…. They didn’t want to be seen as the people bailing Tupac out,” he recalled. “So while all of the lawyers were maneuvering to get bail, there were various plans to get somebody else to be the face of the bail.” There were discussions about it being Jasmine Guy, Madonna, and Jada Pinkett, but when that option fell through, Tupac needed a plan B.

Death Row’s Suge Knight continued to court Tupac, hoping he would decide to move over to the label. He called Tupac and even visited him at Clinton, hoping to cultivate a deeper relationship. Such a move held some appeal for Tupac. Death Row’s artists had soared in popularity over recent years, as album after album the label released went platinum.

But there were troubling signs of unrest at the label. Death Row’s signature artist, Snoop Dogg, was caught in a high-publicity murder trial (of which he was ultimately acquitted months later), and there were rumblings that Dr. Dre was considering breaking ties with the label. But in the meantime, anyone who wanted to work with Dre had to be on Death Row, and Tupac had grown increasingly interested in working with Dre—even mentioning his excitement about it during one of his depositions. Atron recalled, “He said, ‘I wanna work [with] Dre…and the only way I can work with Dr. Dre is if I sign with Death Row.’ ”

Atron quickly moved to shoot Tupac's plans down. "You don't need to do that," he told him. "You're doing really good right now. You're almost at two million records. You're number one. I don't think that's a good idea."

But Tupac wouldn't be dissuaded. His response was "You can come with me. You can call him. Or I'll have someone else call him."

Atron stood firm. "I'm not gonna do that."

Watani also tried to discourage Tupac from signing a contract with Death Row. But as the weeks passed, Tupac began to consider Death Row's overtures more seriously. Even Snoop had been trying to get Tupac to move over, urging Suge, "We need to put that nigga with us."

On September 16, Tupac signed a contract that was drawn up in the visiting room of Clinton Correctional that declared Suge Knight and David Kenner the manager and legal representation of all Tupac's music. With Atron and Watani unwilling to work with Suge and David Kenner, the reins of Tupac's career would officially change hands to Death Row.

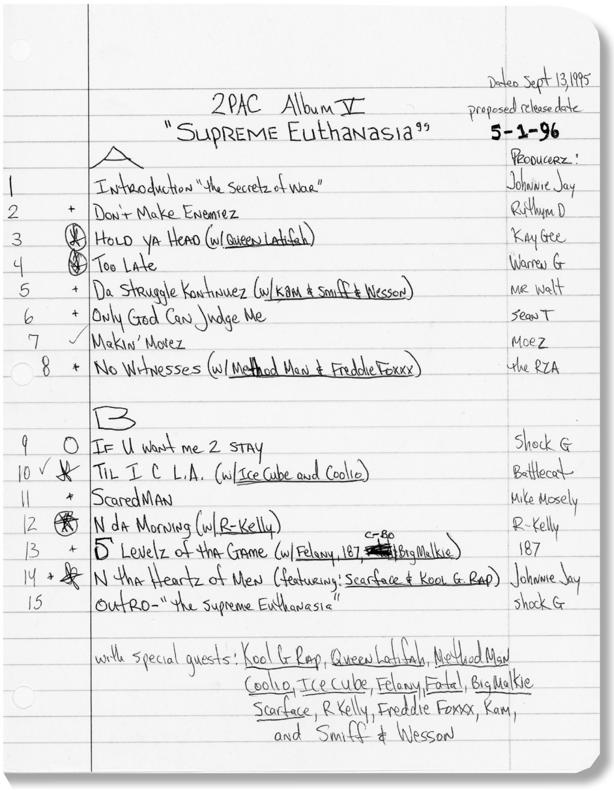
The agreement was a three-album deal advancing Tupac $1 million upon execution, plus $125,000 for the purchase of a car, $120,000 for expenses over the period of one year, and an additional $250,000 for legal fees. There was also a clause guaranteeing that Snoop Dogg "shall make a guest appearance" on the first album. Not in the contract, but discussed, was one of Tupac's most important contingencies: the purchase of a house for Afeni and his sister. It was all he wanted. That and his freedom.

Syke stood next to Tupac as he signed the contract. Tupac was officially a Death Row Records artist. Watching the transfer of power to Death Row, Syke was skeptical of what was ahead. "He signed on a napkin! He was supposed to get five million dollars for three albums," he recalled.

But since Interscope was in partnership with Death Row, Tupac would still be under the Interscope umbrella. "He was still signed to us," Cohen explained. "We allowed him to go to Death Row because Death Row was exclusive to us. So it's not like we let him out of the family." Since Death Row continued to be funded and distributed by Interscope Records, a move to Death Row wouldn't represent a total break but rather a move within the family. And within the family, some saw it as a good idea. Jimmy Iovine encouraged it, believing that since Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg had both seen huge success at Death Row, Tupac would be a good fit there as well. "[When] Suge told me he and Tupac wanted to get together, what I thought of was 'Dre and Pac,' " Iovine explained.

Ultimately, it was decided that Interscope would give Tupac an advance against future royalties to cover his bail. Watani explains, "Death Row was funded through Interscope. So Death Row didn't get him out. It was Pac's publishing money."

With bail finally raised, Tupac just needed word that his appeal was granted. But it would be a slow process. His appeal had been submitted before summer, and now it was a waiting game. "At the time that the appeal was put in, there were three judges on the appellate board, and they were all on vacation at separate times," Atron recalled. "So that's why it took them until the end of the year to look at it."



Dated Sept 13, 1995

proposed release date

5-1-96

2PAC Album V

"Supreme Euthanasia"

		A	Producerz:
1		Introduction "the Secretz of War"	Johnnie Jay
2	+	Don't Make Enemiez	Ruthym D
3	⊛	Hold ya Head (w/ Queen Latifah)	Kay Gee
4	⊛	Too Late	Warren G
5	+	Da Struggle Kontinuez (w/ Kam & Smiff & Wesson)	Mr Walt
6	+	Only God Can Judge Me	Sean T
7	✓	Makin' Movez	Moez
8	*	No Witnesses (w/ Method Man & Freddie Foxxx)	the RZA
		B	
9	○	If U want me 2 stay	Shock G
10	✓ *	Til I C L.A. (w/ Ice Cube and Coolio)	Battlecat
11	*	Scared Man	Mike Mosely
12	⊛	N da Morning (w/ R-Kelly)	R-Kelly
13	+	5 Levelz of tha Game (w/ Felany, 187, [illegible] C-Bo & Big Malkie)	187
14	+ *	N tha Heartz of Men (featuring: Scarface & Kool G. Rap)	Johnnie Jay
15		Outro- "the Supreme Euthanasia"	Shock G

with special guests: Kool G Rap, Queen Latifah, Method Man
Coolio, Ice Cube, Felany, Fatal, Big Malkie
Scarface, R Kelly, Freddie Foxxx, Kam,
and Smiff & Wesson

When envisioning his next album while still incarcerated, Tupac wrote this track list dated September 13, 1995—exactly one year before he was killed.

Click here to view as text

Suddenly, the plans Tupac had been making for the past eight months became more urgent. He started to put together ideas for his next album. He would title it *Supreme Euthanasia.*

Knowing that his release was finally in sight gave Tupac concrete hope. In these last days in prison, the “no hot water,” the “nasty food,” and the “tickets” for not cleaning up his cell ceased to bother him. In an interview, Tupac explained how he pushed to the end of his time in Clinton: “All I kept in my mind is one day I’ll be back.”

One week after signing with Death Row Records, in a letter from Charles Ogletree dated September 22, 1995, Tupac received word that his appeal was granted. As soon as the papers were signed and the money wired, Tupac would be free. Syke remembered the moment. He recalled, “They thought Suge was gonna control [Tupac], but how can you control a piece of dynamite? So what they did is put some more gunpowder so it could all blow up even bigger.”

NIGHTMARES

Dedicated
pour my Heart in2 this poe
LOOK 4 the meaning of
rich and powerful always
the less fortunate strive
TAKES R MADE 2 Be 4
R 2 young 2 stress
path of purity and p
s always ridden rou
I ~~[illegible]~~ INSATIABLE Desire 2 Fl
made your faults mag
iousity can take Blame
the evil that makes
sn't a good feeling when
ightmares haunt your Sou

PART V

TO LIVE AND DIE IN L.A.

20

CALIFORNIA LOVE

1995–1996

> Out on bail, fresh outta jail, California dreamin'!
>
> —TUPAC SHAKUR

At noon on Thursday, October 12, 1995, Tupac was once again a free man. He walked out of Clinton Correctional Facility into the chilly afternoon air, where Yaasmyn Fula and Big Syke greeted him outside the prison gates with a white stretch limousine. They headed straight to a nearby motel and celebrated in a room stocked with Alizé, Champagne, and plenty of weed. It had been almost a year since Tupac had taken a sip of alcohol or felt the calm from smoking a tightly rolled blunt. As soon as he sat down on the edge of the motel bed, he had his fill of both. He was thrilled to be out of the hellhole that was Clinton.

After the motel welcome party, the limo drove Tupac, Yaasmyn, Syke, and his friend Bo Nitty, aka Bogart, to an airport that, according to Syke, was "as small as a damn football field," where Death Row Records had a private plane waiting. They flew to JFK and boarded a commercial jet to California. Upon their arrival, Tupac was welcomed to a new chapter in Death Row style, greeted by a swarm of private security guards as they exited the airport terminal. "It was like the CIA was waiting for us," Syke recalled.

After a quick stop at the Beverly Center Mall to buy a new wardrobe, Tupac and his entourage checked in to the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel before his scheduled dinner with Suge Knight and the Death Row family at Monty's Steakhouse in Westwood. At dinner, Tupac met the man who would take the reins of all his publicity going forward: George Pryce, known to his colleagues as Papa G, the label's in-house publicist. "The entire staff had been instructed to participate in a welcoming dinner for him that night," Pryce recalled. "All the Death Row artists were present for a lavish meal of prime rib, steaks, and lobster—and of course the Louis Roederer Cristal Champagne flowed like water." Pryce remembered Tupac's measured mood that evening. "I watched him. I watched how he related to everyone in the room. I noticed right away he was a little aloof. I guess he was glad to be out, but he wasn't having any of the jokes they were doing."

After dinner, Tupac headed straight to Can-Am Studios, Death Row's studio in Tarzana, but shortly after arriving, the excessive weed smoking after months of abstaining, the celebrations, the cross-country flight, and the night of libations caught up to him. "We was consumin' like a mutha'," admitted Syke. "When that nigga got out of that jail, that was the best time I ever had in my life. I can die right now and I ain't never gonna trip." As Tupac began to rap, his 165-pound body succumbed to exhaustion mid-lyric and he collapsed. Luckily, Suge caught him just before he hit the hard floor and quickly propped him up in a chair. In shock, everyone stared in silence until he finally regained consciousness and headed back to the Peninsula to rest.

Papa G had set up meetings at Tupac's hotel the next day with "every major television network, magazine, and newspaper throughout the United States and Europe." The world was eager to hear from Tupac, curious about his current emotional state and hoping to see his face for the first time in almost a year. But his new publicist quickly realized that interviews were not high on Tupac's priority list. Tupac didn't stick around to talk to any of the reporters. He didn't have time. Instead, he was on his way back to Can-Am.

As he'd done in the past, he set up in multiple studios so he could record two songs at once, bouncing back and forth between them. In one studio, Johnny "J" sat at the mixing board, ready to go. He played some beats for Tupac from his collection of about two hundred options. Tupac listened to the first one, bobbed his head. Just like that, he said, "Oh shit. Let's just call it 'All Eyez on Me.' " He scribbled a long string of words on a pad of paper, then glanced at Syke. “You get on this one, too, Syke.” Within twenty-five minutes, he headed into the sound booth to lay down the vocals.

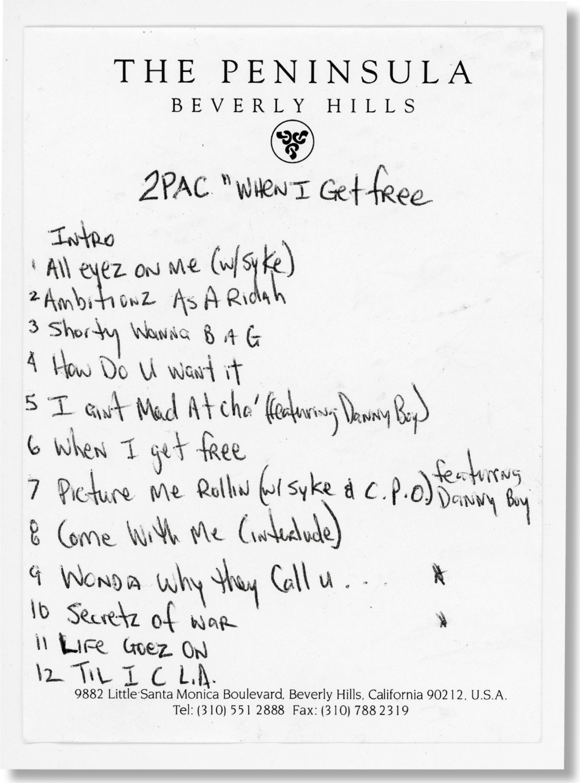
Tupac was back in his element. Free, blunt in hand, back in the studio, his old mindset returned. Perhaps it was because of all that had happened. His lifelong frustration at the ongoing injustice endured by Black people in America had been compounded by his own incarceration, the lies that were told and spun in the media, the jokes that late-night comedians told at his expense, and especially by the betrayals. And now, more than before, he truly didn’t give a fuck. He spelled it all out right there in the lyrics in the song “All Eyez on Me,” the paranoia, the rage, the resistance, and by the time he was finished recording, Tupac had reclaimed his Thug Life philosophies:

Hustle ’til the mornin’, never stopped until the cash came
Live my life as a thug nigga, ’til the day I die

The lyrics on this album would be less political and more personal. There would be no “Brendas” featured, and Tupac would focus less on social commentary. His family wasn’t in California with him. Afeni, Sekyiwa, and Glo were on the other side of the country. And so was Keisha. So much life had happened, and both were dealing with a new reality. The two had decided to split amicably, and Keisha started the annulment process. Watani and Atron were no longer by his side. And Mutulu was still behind bars.

Tupac had a new team surrounding him now—a team that had been taking over the industry at lightning speed. Half a decade after it had exploded into mainstream culture, hip-hop was changing. Political protest songs like those on Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and Boogie Down Productions’ *By All Means Necessary* had fully given way to gangsta rap, which was now dominating the charts. A new set of stars emerged, changing the tone of rap music from social consciousness to themes focusing on money, girls, drinking, smoking weed, and cars. Death Row Records—with its 1992 release of Dr. Dre’s debut album, *The*

Chronic, and Snoop Doggy Dogg's debut, *Doggystyle,* shooting to the number 1 spot, both becoming platinum albums, selling millions worldwide—the label was at the center of it all, ultimately launching one of the biggest parties in America's music industry. Johnny "J" recalls the atmosphere: "We stayed tipsy. The whole time [we recorded that album] should've been sponsored by Hennessey." And it didn't matter that Tupac heard whispers that Dre was on his way out or that Snoop Dogg was on trial for a murder case. Tupac, although he never considered himself to be a gangsta rapper, couldn't wait to work alongside the men who shared space with him atop the *Billboard* charts.



THE PENINSULA
BEVERLY HILLS

2PAC "WHEN I Get free

Intro
1 All eyez ON Me (w/Syke)
2 Ambitionz As A Ridah
3 Shorty Wanna B A G
4 How Do U want it
5 I aint Mad At cha' (featuring Danny Boy)
6 When I get free
7 Picture Me Rollin (w/ Syke & C.P.O.) featuring Danny Boy
8 Come With Me (interlude)
9 WONDA why they Call u . . . *
10 Secretz of WAR *
11 LIFE GOEZ ON
12 TIL I C L.A.

9882 Little Santa Monica Boulevard, Beverly Hills, California 90212, U.S.A.
Tel: (310) 551 2888 Fax: (310) 788 2319

Written on Peninsula letterhead (the hotel where Tupac stayed when he was first released from prison), a track list for Tupac's album *When I Get Free,* which would ultimately become *All Eyez on Me.*

Click here to view as text

Tupac continued to move quickly between Can-Am's studio A and studio B. He first collaborated with Death Row rap artist and producer Daz

Dillinger. “I had just made five fresh beats,” Dillinger recounted. “ ‘Ambitionz,’ the first song that we laid down in a matter of twenty minutes. That song was done. Then we laid ‘I Ain’t Mad at Cha.’ And then we did ‘2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted.’ And ‘Scandalouz,’ and ‘Got My Mind Made Up.’ ” In another interview, he explained that Tupac “came in there and knocked them five out and I was like, damn. He was serious, and that made us get on our job a little more.”

Over the next four days, Tupac lived in the studio, recording an album’s worth of songs: “When I Get Free,” “Ambitionz Az a Ridah,” “I Ain’t Mad at Cha,” “Skandalouz,” “Got My Mind Made Up,” “All Eyez on Me,” “When We Ride,” “How Do U Want It” “Shorty Wanna Be a Thug,” “Picture Me Rollin’,” “All Bout U,” “Wonda Why They Call U Bitch.”

The collaboration with Snoop Dogg brought together two of the biggest and most controversial names in hip-hop. They had recorded “Life’s So Hard” together in 1994, also with Dillinger, and now they channeled their shared experiences of dealing with high-profile legal battles to write and record “2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted.” Years later, in a tribute to Tupac, Snoop reflected on the moment when Tupac joined Death Row Records: “Now with us, it was like he joined the Showtime Lakers. Dre was the coach. Suge was the owner. And me and Pac, we were the stars on the court making history with every new song. We were young, rich, and rock stars. But we were also young Black men with targets on our back. We were catching cases simultaneously. That’s why when we got together we really were ‘2 of Americaz Most Wanted.’ ”

Those who had not worked with Tupac before were blown away by his intensity and focus. “I’ve never seen nobody work like that,” producer DJ Quik would say of Tupac in a radio interview. “I never seen anybody that would go in the studio and dedicate that much time to what he was doing. He was a man on a mission….Every time you went into the studio with him it’s a new song. Where you getting all these new songs? The producers are gettin’ tired.”

By the time he left the studio the Tuesday after his release, he had completed thirteen songs. “Me and you are gonna be the new L.A. and

Babyface," he said to Johnny "J." "I'm gonna be the lyrics, you're gonna be the music."

On October 18, less than a week after Tupac landed in Los Angeles, he rolled up to the Hollywood Athletic Club, a nightclub, bar, and billiard room that VIPs frequented. Tupac hung out with his longtime friend, Treach. Songwriter and producer Delray Richardson smoked a cigarette with Tupac in the club's parking lot that night and recalled how happy Tupac was to be home, and what a complete shift it was for him. "Just last week I was in a maximum-security prison in New York," he told Richardson. "But now I'm out here right now, actually smokin' a cigarette in Hollywood."

That same night would be marked in history for another encounter Tupac had. Not long after Tupac valeted his brand-new Mercedes at the club's entrance, Richardson recalled that recording artist Faith Evans, Biggie's wife, pulled up in a cherry-red BMW M3 convertible. The next day, Evans would head to Can-Am to record a hook on one of Tupac's songs. Evans and Tupac had varying accounts of what happened once they left the studio. In addition to her denial of Tupac's version of events, she also claimed that she didn't know Tupac was signed to Death Row Records or that there were any issues between him and her husband when she accepted his offer to appear on the record.

Tupac agreed to pay Evans $25,000 for her contribution to the song "Wonda Why They Call U Bitch," recorded on October 19. While Evans was in the Can-Am sound booth recording the hook, Tupac sat with *Los Angeles Times* journalist Chuck Philips to discuss his first days out of Clinton and the kind of record he was hoping to put out. "I've been in the studio since the day after I got out," Tupac told him. "About twelve hours a day. Until they kick me out. It be dark, and everybody gotta go to sleep. People be passing out so I be like, 'Okay I guess we gotta go home now.' And then we go home and come back early in the morning and do it again. I think we broke a record. We did thirteen tracks in four days. Thirteen *fat* tracks. The ones that are really gonna be humdingers, big ones…'2 of

Amerikaz Most Wanted' with me and Snoop. 'Shorty Wanna Be a Thug.' 'Wonda Why They Call U Bitch' with Faith—that's gonna be a big one."

He explained to Philips how the last few years had pushed him to make a different kind of record, more confrontational, in response to the heat he'd taken from all quarters. It was an angry record, because Tupac was angry. His rage had been growing across years of politicians trying to censor his lyrics and tarnish his reputation, and, more recently, the personal attacks on his character. "This album is a reaction to the backlash from C. DeLores Tucker, Bob Dole—all those people that just kept sweating me about my music," he said. "I feel as though this album is something for them to sweat. 'Cause before my albums wasn't even bad. And they was calling me gangsta. Just messing up my credit line. And just ruining my reputation…. So now with this album I didn't try to make any 'Dear Mamas' any 'Keep Ya Head Up.' I just came straight with dealin' with my own anger. Getting everything I wanna say out."

Since the sexual-abuse accusation, in which he increasingly believed himself to be set up, some of his anger was also now directed at a certain group of women. He had written "Wonda Why They Call U Bitch" to explain why he believed it was okay to use the word "bitch" at certain times. In an interview with MTV, Tupac explained that he wasn't just throwing the word around loosely. "I think that all women are different," he said. "But I think that there is definitely a type of female—label them a bitch—that do things this way. And their main thing is just to get what they can get. They revel in breaking a nigga's heart, and taking what he owns, and ruining a man."

With prison in his rearview for now, Tupac's productivity bounded to new levels. Days later at Can-Am, as Tupac scribbled lyrics in his notebooks while Johnny sat at the mixing board, the phone rang. It was the label. Tupac picked it up and listened, nodding and throwing in a few uh-huhs. When he hung up, he looked at Johnny and said, "Yo, 'J', it's gonna be a double. We're doin' a double."

And just like that, Tupac's first album on Death Row Records would become a twenty-seven-song epic called *All Eyez on Me.*

—

Tupac was out on bail, but he was not fully free. His ongoing legal battles were all-consuming. Charles Ogletree sent weekly legal memos to the Peninsula hotel addressed to Tupac's alias, "Mr. Welcome Homie," detailing the status of his appeal and briefing Tupac on his pending legal cases in Atlanta, Texas, New York, and California.

Despite—or perhaps because of—his legal woes and his growing balance of fees and settlements, Tupac continued to move at warp speed through the album's production. One day, a despondent Johnny "J" showed up at the studio and told Tupac, "Man I'm not gonna let this affect my creativity, but I just found out that I was adopted."

Tupac felt for his partner, but he didn't have time to ponder Johnny's personal problems. He hadn't even stopped for a moment to ponder his own. But still, Tupac attempted to let Johnny know he understood. "Damn, 'J,' I don't even *know* my pops," Tupac responded. "So let's just keep workin'. Fuck it."

With everything else Tupac had to work through at this time, he now had to deal with the murder of one of his longtime friends. On November 30, 1995, exactly one year after Tupac was shot at Quad Studios in New York, Randy "Stretch" Walker was shot and killed in Queens. Tupac had once done nothing without Stretch by his side, and yet they had not spoken to each other since Tupac had gotten out of prison. Tupac had felt betrayed by Stretch's actions in the days and weeks following the robbery at Quad, and the two had not had the opportunity to reconcile before Stretch was killed.

Still not wanting to take any days off, Tupac had finally granted one of the interviews Papa G had been trying to schedule, a conversation with MTV's Tabitha Soren. Under a bluish-gray sky, the two strolled down Venice Beach's famed boardwalk together. As they made their way down the beachside path, surrounded by a camera crew, he talked about his childhood, the job he held at Round Table Pizza, his mother's hero status, his time in prison, and how Shock G came to see him while he was in jail.

He also discussed his views on college. “I always wanted to go to college. But I wanted to go to college and be comfortable….Like, I know a lot of people that in college they have their lives already okay. Someone’s paying for them to go to college. They have somewhere to live. They have somewhere to live while they’re going to college. They get money, all that….Somebody could pay their tuition….I don’t have that. Until I could have that, I can’t go to college, even though I want to.”

Partway through the interview, Tupac stopped to try on sunglasses and slipped into Andy Nevill’s tattoo parlor. Soon after, he walked out with a tattoo on his right forearm. The tattoo captured an increasingly dominant part of Tupac’s worldview: “Trust Nobody.” In a deposition months before, he explained, “Stay to yourself. Trust nobody. Trust nobody. My closest friends did me in. My homies. People who I took care of their whole family…turned on me. Fear is stronger than love. All the love I gave didn’t mean nothing when it came to fear. But I’m a soldier. I always survive. I constantly come back. The only thing that will ever stop me is death and even then, my music will live forever.”

Tupac appreciated Death Row for the opportunities the label gave him at a critical time in his life, but he knew that it wasn’t a forever place for him. “I want to get into the head seat,” he said. “I believe I’m a natural-born leader.” Tupac had just spent the last year under the complete control of others. The jury. The judge. The media. The doctors at the hospital. The prison guards. In this moment, with all the uncertainty still in his future, Tupac was absolutely clear about one thing: He needed to have total control over his own life, wherever and whenever possible. The first step in accomplishing this was forming a company. He would call it Euphanasia, a word he created that in his mind evoked both “euphoria” and “euthanasia”—pure happiness combined with absolute control of one’s own life and choices. And he would be the CEO and president.

To do this, he would need to build a new team. Tupac expressed that his plan was to surround himself with people he trusted. He believed that he had just gone to prison for a crime he did not commit in part because he’d surrounded himself with people he didn’t know. He first called Yaasmyn

Fula, who had worked with Afeni years before at Bronx Legal Services and who had been working with Tupac throughout his incarceration; she would serve as his office manager. Yaas had been in Tupac's life since he was born, since the days of COINTELPRO. Her son, Yafeu (Yaki), and Tupac had grown up side by side, with Yaas often caring for Tupac and Sekyiwa when Afeni needed help. The families stayed close over the years, and Yaasmyn had been a trusted go-between with Interscope and Death Row when he was in prison and working on making bail. When Tupac asked Yaas to move from New Jersey, without hesitation she loaded a U-Haul, put her dog, Louie, in her car, and drove across the country to Los Angeles.

Next, he reached out to Kendrick Wells, his close friend from Marin. They had lost touch for a while but reconnected through an exchange of letters while Tupac was in prison. This meant Kendrick would relocate from Marin County to Los Angeles to begin working as Tupac's personal assistant.

Yaasmyn set up the new business accounts and signed a lease for the first Euphanasia office above the Erewhon Market on Beverly Boulevard. For the company logo, Tupac knew exactly what he wanted. He hired an artist to sketch his design: a black angel with the word "Makaveli" tattooed on his chest, representing Tupac's alter ego; a ruby-red teardrop on the angel's cheek, representing the fallen soldiers; a machine gun in the angel's hands with a belt of piano keys in place of bullets to symbolize that Tupac's lyrics were his weapon.

A big part of Tupac's desire to go to Death Row had been his hope to work with legendary producer Dr. Dre. Now it was happening. Dre already had a perfect song ready to go called "California Love," and on November 4, at Can-Am in studio B, they went to work.

As Tupac went into the sound booth, he admitted, "Dre, you don't know how long I've been waiting to get in this booth."

Dre recounted, "I put this track on. He starts writing. After twenty or thirty minutes he said, 'I got the verse. Turn the fuckin' mic on.' "

They knew the song was a hit, but there was no way they could have foreseen the levels of success their collaboration would reach. "California

Love" was Dre and Tupac's love letter to California, and was later deemed by music journalist Soren Baker, "an instant hip-hop classic," one that "created a tsunami of anticipation of Tupac's Death Row Records material…a critical and commercial triumph."

During the recording of the *All Eyez on Me* album, Tupac continued to work with his protégé group, consisting of Katari, Yafeu, Malcolm, Mutah, and newest member Bruce Washington. He would give the group a new name, but simply naming the group wasn't enough. Like everything else Tupac created, even their PKA's (Professional Known As) had to have meaning and intention. The seed of the idea had come to Tupac at Clinton. "While he was in jail he was reading a lot of books, and when we would come to visit him…we would build on the information," recalled Malcolm.

Tupac told them, "Yo, going forward, we're gonna be The Outlaw Immortalz. I'm taking the name Makaveli. And we're all gonna have aliases. We're gonna take actual people that we know this country despises. Because we feel like as the young Black males we are despised in this country.' " He told them that he wanted to give them the names of tyrants, enemies of the state. And so the Outlawz were bestowed with new names. Katari, eighteen years old and a brand-new California resident, would go by Kastro, after Cuban president Fidel Castro. Malcolm became E.D.I. Mean, after former Ugandan president Idi Amin. Yafeu would be Kadafi, after Libya's revolutionary politician Muammar Gaddafi. Mutah became Napolean after France's emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. And Bruce Washington, a friend of Yafeu, would become Hussein Fatal, after Saddam Hussein.

Tupac even came up with a name for Syke: Mussolini, after Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. Syke laughed remembering the day Tupac gave him his new name. "When he named me Mussolini, I had to go grab a book and read up on this fool," he said.

During the production of *All Eyez on Me,* Tupac met another artist he wanted to take under his wing. After meeting Donna "Storm" Harkness, a rapper and veteran of Operation Desert Storm, he quickly added her to the Outlawz lineup. Storm recalled their quick bond, a rare instance for her. "I didn't trust a lot of people, because growing up most people let me down," she said. "When I met Pac, it wasn't about me not being able to hold my own or like I had never seen a gun. I trained to be a soldier….And coming into meeting Pac and the way he was structuring everything I understood. I fell right in line and was like, 'You're my general.' "

Tupac had so much faith in Storm's artistry that he put her on three of the four songs he recorded with the Outlawz that day—"Tradin' War Stories," "Run tha Streetz," and "Thug Passion."

"California Love" was lined up to be the first single from *All Eyez on Me.* Dre signed off on the concept for the music video, an idea that came from Jada Pinkett, who had become friends with Dre and other artists on Death Row over the past months. Dre asked Jada to direct Tupac in the video. It would have been one more chance for the two high school friends to work on another project together—something they had continued to dream of since Baltimore School for the Arts, but Jada ultimately had to decline. "I was like, I want Dre's video to be tight," she recalled, "and I want to concentrate on it, and this is just not the time."

Instead, the label brought on famed director Hype Williams to tweak Jada's original idea of a dystopian society where people have lost the right to individualism and the ability to have fun. On set the day of the shoot, in an interview, Dre summarized the music video's story line: "The whole concept of the video: Los Angeles, California, the year 2095. After the end of the world. *Mad Max* type of vibe. There's a villain in it. Clifton Powell is playing the villain. And his sidekick [is] Chris Tucker. They're trying to stop me and Tupac from having parties. Whoever controls the parties controls the people."

In the mid-1990s, before digital music and streaming changed the game forever, album rollouts were like war plans, with singles, videos, publicity, and more orchestrated on a coordinated timeline meant to maximize album sales. "California Love's" expensively produced *Mad Max*–esque video was a key piece of the *All Eyez* rollout. It played frequently on MTV and VH1, electrifying not only hip-hop fans but transfixing music lovers from all cultures around the world.

The song was an instant success, hitting number 1 on the *Billboard* charts in the United States, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden, and Canada, and even generating a second music video.

All Eyez on Me was scheduled for a February 13, 1996, release. As the date approached, Tupac was nervous, even with all the hype the first single and its music video had created. Although his fans were impressed with "California Love," he remained worried that they would not accept the album in its entirety. After everything that had happened over the past year—from all the controversies to the legal battles to the media's negative spin on the events in his life to his time in prison—he worried that he'd lost a good part of his fan base.

By now, Tupac had moved from the Peninsula hotel in Beverly Hills into the Wilshire House condominiums on the Wilshire corridor. Since leaving prison, he was finally able to settle in and set up a home, a place where he could hold business and creative meetings, but where he could host friends and family as well. It was also where his label mate Snoop Dogg lived, putting them both in proximity to Suge, who was living in the luxury condos across the street.

On February 12, the day before the album's release, Kendrick recalled Tupac anxiously pacing back and forth in the living room of his new place. Kendrick said, "He was really worried the day before *All Eyez on Me* dropped. It was all over his face…nervous as hell thinking he wasn't going to live up to the expectations of the album."

All fears were quickly dismissed when *All Eyez on Me* flew off the shelves and skyrocketed up the *Billboard* charts. Before the end of the first week, Tupac received a phone call at his condo. Holding the phone to his ear as he sat on the couch, wearing nothing but his boxers, he put his hand on his forehead in disbelief. He laughed, hung up the phone, and turned to those in the room. "I just went platinum."

By April, *All Eyez on Me* had sold 5 million units. The album eventually secured Tupac a spot in the exclusive club for musicians reaching diamond certification.

One week after the release, Tupac and his Death Row team celebrated with another dinner at Monty's Steakhouse in Westwood. This time Tupac wasn't aloof, nor was he just getting to know everyone. Just twelve weeks after signing with Death Row, spending upward of fifteen hours a day at the studio, and frequenting meetings and dinners with his new business associates, Tupac had grown accustomed to the workings of his new record label and all its key players. He had heard all the rumors of how Suge used intimidation as a standard business practice—his aquarium filled with piranhas and the stories of his threats to hang people over balconies if they didn't see things Suge's way. Whether these stories were true or not, they definitely shaped how he was seen in the public eye. According to Tupac's family, though, Tupac wasn't worried about Suge's treatment of him. His personal experience with Suge up until this point was one of mutual respect.

And now, back at the same Westwood restaurant where he was first welcomed into the Death Row family, he reveled in this new level of success with his label mates. Tupac had come so far since his early years rappin' in Baltimore with Mouse, or with Ant Dog, Ryan D, and Gable in Marin City, since the day he had recorded his "audition" video for Atron with Ray Luv in Leila's backyard. How quickly time had flown since he was humping blow-up dolls onstage with Money-B and Shock G, the days when he had obsessed about the low sales of *2Pacalypse Now*. With the success of *All Eyez on Me,* he was finally able to breathe. "He was happy," Glo remembered of that time. "He'd been living in the studio since he was released. We were still living in Atlanta, riding around in our car playing 'California Love.' Wherever you were, you would hear the song. The period from when he got out all through that next year was the *happy time*."

That year, Tupac received his first Grammy nominations, in two categories for his previous album, *Me Against the World*—Best Rap Album and Best Rap Solo Performance for "Dear Mama." He was also invited to present the award for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group. The day of the ceremony, he purchased a few new suits by his favorite designer, Gianni Versace, as options to wear that evening. When he got home, Afeni and Glo, who had flown out for a visit, were hanging out in the living room. "Did y’all go shopping today?” he yelled from the bedroom. Though he’d given Afeni and Glo money to spend, he expected their answer to be no. Afeni never wanted to buy new clothes. “He used to call us Bob Marley and Peter Tosh because of our clothes,” recalled Glo.

This time, however, they had bought new outfits. But true to form, their fashion sense ran opposite to Tupac’s. When they showed him the clothes they’d purchased, he gasped. “I give you money to go shopping and you go to the Gap to buy khakis?” he asked in disbelief. The laughter that filled the room underscored a mutual calm and relief among the three of them.

Now it was Tupac’s turn to show them what he was wearing for the Grammys. He stood in front of them in one of the Versace suits as if on a runway. But suddenly, to his horror, he realized a button was missing. Everyone in the room frantically searched for not only the button but also thread, needle, and a pair of scissors to help with this wardrobe malfunction. Glo went to work sewing as he rushed to get out the door. When the final thread was cut and he stood again in that runway pose, he asked, “How do I look?”

Afeni and Glo, filled with pride, smiled warmly.

“He looked beautiful,” Glo remembered years later.

“My Darlin’ Dear,” said Glo, gazing at him with her hand on her heart.

Never one to miss an opportunity to make fun of his mother and his aunt, he asked, laughing, “Who *are* you people?” As the elevator door closed, Afeni and Glo exchanged a glance, reminded of how far their family had traveled, hopeful that things were finally moving in a positive direction.

Just hours later, at the Shrine Auditorium, Tupac stepped in front of a mic, smiling, enjoying center stage on music’s biggest night. After some small talk about his “Versace hookup,” he let the audience know he was going to try to “liven it up” at the Grammys. “Let’s shock the people!” he exclaimed, which was the cue for one of America’s most notable rock bands, KISS, to join him onstage. After Tupac introduced them as his “homeboys,” the four band members strutted out in full makeup and their signature garb—for the first time in over a decade—and stood with Tupac to announce the nominees for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group.

Tupac had arrived. He was a nominee for not one but two awards, and his invitation to share the stage as a presenter with one of America's most legendary rock bands solidified a rock-star status of his own.

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And yet with all he had to celebrate, now that *All Eyez on Me* had hit number 1 on the *Billboard* charts almost a year to the day after *Me Against the World* had done the same, Tupac was still working out his anger—specifically toward his former friend Biggie.

For the third single of his album, "How Do U Want It," Tupac decided to make a song he recorded months before, "Hit 'Em Up," the B-side. The song had been on his mind since he was in Clinton, and the time had come for Tupac to respond to Biggie's "Who Shot Ya?" Malcolm "E.D.I." Greenidge explained, "Hip-hop beef has its roots in playing the Dozens. 'The Dozens' are a form of verbal play where participants shoot clever insults at one another. The winner is usually chosen by whatever audience is in attendance. 'Battling' or 'rap battles' are as old as the artform itself. Examples of it are in abundance: Busy Bee v. Kool Moe Dee, KRS-One v. Queensbridge, Ice Cube v. N.W.A to name a few. This is what makes rap/hip-hop similar to a sport.… You add to this money, fame, power, and you now have a toxic brew for the participants to get drunk on."

Even though Tupac saw this as a response to Biggie's song, he took it to the absolute extreme. Katari remembered, "The song shook up the rap game. You got beef records, people going back and forth, but what Pac did with that record is that he made it very personal. It changed the way beef songs were done. They became more personal. 'Hit 'Em Up' turned the hip-hop community upside down to where the beef shit is not so trivial. Egos and pride got involved. It became serious."

The powerful combination of Tupac's anger and justified paranoia wouldn't let him stop at Biggie. He decided to go after everyone he perceived to be on Biggie's side, dragging other East Coast artists into the feud, even rappers he'd never met, such as the duo Mobb Deep, who had supposedly dissed Tupac at a live show. When Tupac heard the song “Messenger” by the rapper Nas, he took the lyrics personally, feeling that Nas was calling him a “fake thug” and making a mockery of the Quad Studios shooting.

All this, combined with the fuel the media was now using to ignite an already combustible situation, helped to escalate this moment into one of the worst wars in hip-hop, historically known as the East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry. Rap artist KRS-One explained, “*Vibe* magazine and *Source* magazine—they were the ones that were hyping the Tupac and Biggie battles. There were other little battles going on around, and little beefs, little scrimmages, but Bad Boy vs. Death Row…that was…the pinnacle.”

As planned, Death Row sent “Hit ’Em Up” to radio stations across the country. In a radio interview, Tupac claimed that “Hit ’Em Up” was “a classic hip-hop record, meaning a straight battle record to all the Bad Boy staff. It’s to Puffy to Biggie to Lil’ Kim to all of them.” Even as Tupac went for the jugular, he continued to claim that it was just a response to Biggie’s song “Who Shot Ya?”

The reaction from some closest to Tupac was confusion and, in some cases, deep frustration. His publicist and close friend Karen Lee heard the song but didn’t recognize the man she knew. She called him that day, and when he answered, she said, “I don’t wanna speak to you, I wanna speak to the guy that wrote ‘Brenda’s Got a Baby’ and ‘Keep Ya Head Up,’ because I don’t know who this person is who wrote this shit!”

Suge and Death Row, however, couldn’t have been more pleased, as they reaped the rewards from the firestorm that Tupac’s lyrics created. More controversy meant more album sales, and Suge not only showed Tupac his support around the ongoing controversy but also made a great effort to keep him happy and give him no reason to leave Death Row. He made sure Tupac’s request to buy a house for his mother outright had been fulfilled. Afeni had now moved into her newly purchased six-bedroom split-level home, nestled in the woods of Stone Mountain, Georgia. Anytime Tupac requested money, an envelope stacked with cash would show up. If Tupac asked for a Mercedes, he got it. Living expenses for both Tupac and the

Outlawz were taken care of by the label. Even the payroll of his newly formed company, Euphanasia, was paid for by Death Row initially. And when Tupac did express any displeasure, gifts, sometimes in the form of cash or sometimes a new car, would be delivered.

For the first time ever, Tupac was not worried about where his next paycheck was coming from. Or how he was going to pay his mother's rent. One evening, enjoying this newfound freedom, Tupac savored the moment and took one of his favorite cars, a black convertible Rolls-Royce Corniche, out for a cruise. Karen Lee remembered seeing him riding down Sunset Boulevard, smoking a blunt. In stunned disbelief, she crept up next to him at a red light. Excited to see her, he quickly pulled over, jumped out of his car, and waited for her to stop and park behind him. After they hugged, Karen's smile melted as she looked at his car. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Tupac grinned.

She paused, thinking about the fact that he was out on bail and still had an appeal to win. She looked at him and then at the flashy car again. "Tupac, you're not free and clear here."

Tupac brushed her off. "Karen, you need to come over to the studio and see what I'm doin'!"

She interrupted him. "No, you need to come to my house so we can talk!" Tupac tried to get a word in, but Karen continued to vent her frustration with him. "What are you doing, Pac? You're riding down Sunset, music blastin' in a white man's car. What are you doing?"

Tupac didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to hear anyone. He was just glad to be anywhere but in an isolation cell at Clinton Correctional. He was on a material high, and he didn't want anyone to bring him out of it.

Another aspect of this new chapter that Tupac cherished was the ability to spoil his family. He loved being able to fly them out to Los Angeles. Their presence in his new home filled Tupac with a deep sense of accomplishment. He had fulfilled a lifelong promise to his family. He had finally achieved a level of success that would give them financial security for the rest of their lives. From a young age, he had promised his sister and his mother that he'd always take care of them. And when they walked into his Wilshire House condo, he felt he'd finally made that dream come true.

When family came into town, first on the agenda was to make a pot of his special gumbo. He would send someone to the store to buy fresh crab and all the additional ingredients. The recipe had been updated—the dish would no longer include Oodles of Noodles, and there would be no chicken egg rolls on the menu. Lobster and crab, the food that used to be an every-once-in-a-while treat only for special occasions, was now an any-day-of-the-week luxury. And Tupac knew just what to do with it. "Tupac is a better gumbo chef than rapper," recalled Kendrick. "You couldn't get what he cooked from any fancy restaurant."

In March of 1996, Tupac started production on his next album, which he decided to record under his alias, Makaveli, a name he chose to honor his admiration for the Italian philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli, whom he'd learned about years before in his high school world history class. Tupac explained Machiavelli's philosophies: "I idolize that type of thinking where you do whatever's gonna make you achieve your goal." Tupac strongly believed that every human being had the right to express themselves through whatever art form they chose. Like *All Eyez on Me, Makaveli* would also be more personal than political.

The album would be titled *The Don Killuminati: The 3 Day Theory (Makaveli)*. He later changed the subtitle to *The 7 Day Theory*. Once again, Tupac conjured an intricate conceptual framework. A mashup of "kill" and "Illuminati," Tupac coined "Killuminati" after spending time in prison reading up on the mysterious world of historical secret societies—groups who quietly exerted vast power on world events. He wanted to apply this concept to the modern day, and more specifically to his own life. His goal was to create a counterbalance to what he saw as the hidden power structures that stood in the way of creating a more egalitarian society. He especially wanted to draw the attention of elite groups in the realm of American politics. "No politicians is even checkin' for us," he explained. "But by the next election I promise I'm gonna be sitting across from all the candidates. I bet you. I promise you…I guarantee you we will have our own political party. And it won't be just for Black people. It's gonna be for Mexicans. It's gonna be for Black people. It's gonna be for Armenians….All you Lost Tribe muthafuckas right now, we need to have our own political party 'cause we all have the same muthafuckin'…we built this nation."

While recording songs for *Makaveli,* Tupac received the script for *Gridlock'd,* a movie that film producer Preston Holmes had written to him about while he was at Clinton. Tupac read the script and called Holmes right away. Holmes recalls, "I said, 'What'd you think?' He said, 'I fuckin' love it. This is cool. Let's do this.' " With a touch of apprehension, since he wasn't sure how Tupac would react, Holmes brought up the fact that Tim Roth, recently of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction,* was already signed on and that Tupac would be acting alongside him. Tupac's reaction surprised him: "Oh shit, he's a bad muthafucka. I love that cat."

The film studio heads weren't as confident in Tupac's reliability as Preston was. They felt he was still a high risk with the pending appeal and looming legal troubles. Preston fought hard to convince them Tupac was the right choice. After he agreed to sign a completion bond letter that stated his court appearances would not interfere with the proposed ten-week shooting schedule and that if they did he would cover the financial losses, Tupac was signed on. Within days he found himself preparing for the role of Spoon, a heroin-addicted cellist.

At Tupac's request, his record label rented him a cello and leased him a cottage on the beach in Malibu's exclusive Colony neighborhood. As someone who'd drawn on method acting techniques going back to his time at BSA, he felt like he needed the isolation, and the sound of the waves crashing against the quiet beachside would be a perfect setting.

Soon, his schedule was packed and what would seem overwhelming to most: Day shoots for *Gridlock'd* ran up against all-nighters at Can-Am, where he was still churning out songs at lightning speed, sometimes three or four a night, sometimes simultaneously. He and the Outlawz spent days, hours, weeks in the studio. Tupac used his albums to allow them to hone their skills as he prepared them for their own album, the first release on his

Makaveli record label. E.D.I. of the Outlawz recalled this time in the studio with Tupac as an education: “Making music with him was like going to school every day.”

Although Tupac’s pace never waned, the chaotic, high-energy atmosphere at Can-Am shifted as summer approached. The onlookers who had stood on the sidelines during the production of *All Eyez on Me* were sent home. Tupac wanted to set a more serious tone. He began to lock the studio doors and monitor guests. The party was officially over. If you weren’t working *on* the album, you were persona non grata. “Towards the last sessions we did, it got kind of emotional,” Johnny recalled. “It wasn’t like, let’s get all drunk and happy. It was an emotional stage. It felt, like, not depressing, but just serious. It got really serious toward the end, just a real calm atmosphere.”

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IN THE EVENT OF MY DEMISE

1996

When my heart can beat no more
I hope I die for a principle
or a belief that I had lived 4
I will die before my time

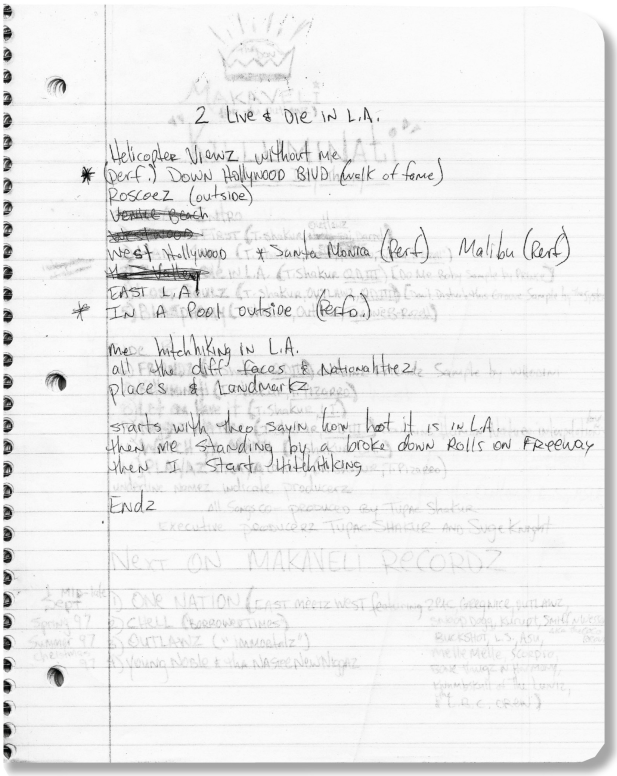
—TUPAC SHAKUR

"While I was at Baltimore School for the Arts, everyone told me there were no acting jobs for the Black man," Tupac told Tabitha Soren. But he had forged ahead anyway, crashing through barriers and roadblocks, until eventually every one of his Hollywood career aspirations from childhood came to pass. Tupac began to see his life from a new perspective. He started to look ahead in a way he had never done before and set his intentions for new aspirations. Instead of struggling to pay past-due bills and ensure that everyone's immediate needs were taken care of, he was able to build a foundation and for the first time in a long time was excited to see a bright and promising future.

Kidada Jones would become part of that future he saw for himself. They had met in 1994 before he had gone to prison. Before he signed with Death Row Records. Kidada, the daughter of famed music mogul Quincy Jones and *Mod Squad* star Peggy Lipton, first met Tupac at a nightclub in New York, when Tupac mistakenly thought she was Rashida, Kidada's younger sister. The moment he started to talk to her, thinking he was speaking to Rashida, he apologized for remarks he made in the November 1993 issue of *The Source* magazine, when he condemned interracial couples and specifically called out her father, claiming that all who took part in such relationships make "fucked up kids." Once he realized he was actually talking to another one of Quincy's children, he hoped she would give him the time to get to know her. Almost immediately, Tupac found himself wanting to date one of those “fucked-up kids” and knew he better make this apology count to redeem himself. He expressed his deep regret and blamed his harsh words on his own immaturity. Whether she was willing to get to know him better or not, Tupac hoped she could feel his sincerity. Luckily for him, Kidada chose to forgive him.

Fast-forward two years and several more apologies, including one Tupac had to make directly to Kidada’s father, Quincy, and the two were able to know each other. Kidada was three years younger than Tupac and possessed all the qualities he looked for in a woman: She was independent, creative, loving, and, like Tupac, strong-willed. A life and a future were coming into focus for Tupac. He felt himself approaching rap royalty status and could actually see the empire he wanted to build. In his mind, he’d found the right partner for the next chapter of his life and all he wanted to accomplish. “I think him and Kidada were probably realer than anybody,” recalled Afeni. “Every other relationship [he had] had other reasons. His relationship with Kidada, in his mind, was forever.”

Kidada’s older brother, Quincy, an established music producer professionally known as QD3, also decided not to hold Tupac’s remarks against him. In fact, once he found out his sister was seeing Tupac, QD3 asked Kidada to help him connect with Tupac about a possible collaboration. Days later, QD3 slipped a cassette tape of his music with his cell number under Tupac’s door. “He called back the same night and said, ‘[I] liked all of them, let’s go do it,’ ” QD3 recalled.



2 Live & Die IN L.A.

Helicopter Viewz without me
* (perf.) Down Hollywood Blvd (walk of fame)
Roscoez (outside)
~~Venice Beach~~
~~Westwood~~
West Hollywood * Santa Monica (Perf) Malibu (Perf)
~~The Valley~~
EAST L.A.
* IN A Pool outside (Perfo.)

me hitchhiking in L.A.
all the diff faces & Nationalitiez
places & Landmarkz

starts with theo sayin how hot it is in L.A.
then me standing by a broke down Rolls on Freeway
then I Start Hitchhiking

Endz

Handwritten video treatment ideas for Tupac's music video for "To Live & Die in L.A."

Click here to view as text

Over the next several months, Tupac and QD3 recorded a number of songs together, including "Teardrops and Closed Caskets," "To Live and Die in L.A.," "Lost Souls," and a passionate and prolific plea called "Letter to the President." "I guess it's 'cause we Black that we targets," Tupac wrote, never forgetting the men who had helped shape his perspective:

Ride for Mutulu like I ride for Geronimo
Down to die for everything I represent

Now, with Tupac's shift in priorities, it was important for him to secure a home base, to settle down in a place big enough to host his family and friends and begin to establish roots. The record label leased a newly constructed 6,000-square-foot home at 4730 Azucena in Calabasas, California, a suburb approximately twenty-five miles west of Los Angeles.

The two-story mini estate had a spacious marble foyer, a winding staircase, a large granite-countertop kitchen, six bedrooms, and a swimming pool.

Since his childhood, Tupac's immediate and extended family had always been his most reliable source of joy. According to his family, he never liked to be alone, so he was more than ready to extend invitations and fill his home with as many of them as would come.

Besides members of the Outlawz, Jamala was the first family member Tupac was able to persuade. Even though it had been over thirteen years since she and Tupac had lived together at the house on Carrigan Avenue in White Plains, New York, they'd always remained close. As soon as she arrived, she became his alarm clock and his private chef, responsible for cooking his favorite meal, fried chicken. "Once I started frying his chicken, he wasn't gonna ever let me go home," Jamala recalled fondly.

The role of preparing food in his home was incredibly meaningful to Tupac. Before Jamala's arrival at the Calabasas house, he had asked his mother to have home-cooked meals prepared for him at his Wilshire House condo so that when he walked in the door, exhausted, the smell of his mother's cooking would greet him. The welcoming aroma was just part of what he needed to feel at home. Afeni at first, and now Jamala, would make sure that the refrigerator was stocked with his favorites: Heineken, yogurt, shrimp, and if nothing else, the two staples in his diet that were replenished on a daily basis (besides his supply of weed and Phillies): Sunkist orange soda and sunflower seeds.

In June, Afeni, Sekyiwa, and her two children, Nzingha and baby Malik, traveled to L.A. just in time for Tupac's twenty-fifth birthday. Glo and T.C. also arrived early the same afternoon. They all gathered at the house, along with Yaasmyn Fula and the Outlawz. Imani, Jamala's four-year-old daughter, who had moved in with Tupac and her mother earlier that month, was excited that her cousins were coming. In preparation for their arrival, Uncle Tupac handed her a pile of money for a shopping spree at Toys "R" Us.

But the day of his birthday, Tupac himself was uninterested in any celebratory plans the family may have made. It was game six of the NBA finals between the Seattle SuperSonics and the Chicago Bulls, and all he cared about was the game. Tupac wanted to be front and center to witness NBA history, to see whether or not Bulls legend Michael Jordan would secure another championship ring.

But the day kept slipping away from him. When Tupac sat down on his couch and tried to turn on the TV, he couldn't get it to work. And then when the phone rang, Tupac's frustration turned into exasperation. Someone from Death Row called to remind him of a photo shoot with Suge and Snoop later that evening. Tupac didn't want to go. He threw the phone across the room, spewing a string of obscenities. For most of the last year, he had refused to even step out of the studio to celebrate, not even for a quick meal with friends. He was too busy. But now all he wanted to do was spend his birthday at home, in his new house, with the people he loved most. Instead he had to run out of the house to get to the photo shoot.

Accustomed to his outbursts, his family and everyone else who was there continued to prepare for his birthday. Sekyiwa tended to Malik while Afeni set up the cake, decorated with a sketched image of Tupac when he was six years old. Glo washed the spinach and fried the chicken while Yaasmyn sat outside by the pool and conducted business on her constantly ringing cellphone. Birthday cards were spread across the kitchen counter, including one from Afeni with a long, heartfelt mother-to-son message of pride.

Angry and agitated, he and the Outlawz made their way to his condo at the Wilshire House, where they stopped momentarily to catch the tail end of the game and watch Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls win. After a quick appearance at the photo shoot, they'd ended up at Can-Am Studios.

Back at the Calabasas home, the cake sat untouched. As the hours passed and Tupac didn't return, Glo and Yaasmyn decided to track him down and bring the party to him. They packed up the chicken wings, a bottle of hot sauce, and the cake. They found him at Can-Am and settled into the studio's kitchen. Producer Kurupt and some other Death Row artists were there working as well. Glo and Yaasmyn waited patiently, hoping everyone would take a quick break, even if just for a minute, so they could sing “Happy Birthday.”

Finally, Tupac appeared. “What are you all doin’ here?!” And then he saw the food. “Oh okay, let these people eat this cake then.”

“We’re waiting on you,” Glo replied.

“Naw, let them eat. Go ’head without me.”

He returned to the sound booth to finish his song.

After some of the Outlawz dug in, Tupac finally joined in for a moment and quickly ate a couple of chicken wings, only to return to the sound booth minutes later.

“Once again,” Glo recalls, “we were defeated…. We were sold into whatever his schedule was even if it was his birthday. That’s what it was.” By then his family was used to standing aside for his relentless ambition. They knew he was on a mission, working tirelessly day and night. Accepting things for what they were, Glo and Yaasmyn slid back into Tupac’s convertible Jaguar and drove back to the house through the balmy Southern California night air.

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Two weeks later, Tupac received an invitation from Gianni Versace to walk in his runway show during Fashion Week in Milan, Italy. It would be Tupac’s first trip abroad since traveling to Japan with Digital Underground, and, even more exciting, his first time ever walking a runway. Creating his own fashion line was already on his list of future endeavors. For him, this trip would serve as a confirmation that he was on the right path. Donatella Versace remembered, “We brought Tupac to Milan, and nobody in fashion was working with Black artists then. Nobody was working with rappers. It was not inclusive, at all.” He and Kidada would stay in a suite at the Hotel Principe Di Savoia and spend some of their time enjoying the Milan nightlife. At one club, Tupac even gave an impromptu performance to a group of warm, welcoming Italian fans.

Italy proved to be an exceptional time for Tupac. From experiencing Fashion Week for the first time to meeting his favorite designer and walking the runway with Kidada—it was a trip that proved to go beyond even his expectations.

Upon his return to Los Angeles, despite his complete heartbreak over the airline losing two of his suitcases carrying the new wardrobe that Versace himself had gifted to him, Tupac was on a creative high and ready to begin his new direction. Part of that was getting past the East Coast/West Coast rift that he knew he was, in part, responsible for creating. His plan was to spearhead a collaboration album of East Coast and West Coast rappers that he would call *One Nation*. It would be an overture to reconciliation, a call to end the bicoastal warfare that Tupac became part of when he was shot at Quad Studios, and that the media had been hyping since he walked out of Clinton.

Tupac's first call was to fellow rap artist and friend Greg Nice of the duo Nice & Smooth. On the call, he explained to Nice his vision and said that since he was from New York, Tupac felt he could be instrumental in helping him coordinate the beginnings of the *One Nation* project. "I gotta fix this," Nice recalled him saying. "He wanted to get it right." Since Nice had fans in both California and New York, Tupac thought he could be the bridge between himself and East Coast artists. Right away, he asked Nice to call two of his East Coast contacts, music producer Easy Mo Bee and rap artist Buckshot.

He was so anxious to set his plan in motion that he turned his Calabasas home into a hotel for the artists who flew in. Even the Outlawz, who had their own places at the Oakwood Residence Apartments in Sherman Oaks, ended up staying at the Calabasas home for much of this time. He also planned to ask E-40 from the Bay Area to join the project, along with Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, Scarface from Houston, Grand Puba, Raekwon, and Atlanta's Outkast.

As the project started to come together, Tupac knew there was still lots of work to be done. He also knew, based on his past experiences with the media, no coverage would be given to anything positive he did. Bringing attention to *One Nation* would be left to him. On June 18, he attended Pool AID 96, a charity event benefiting AIDS Project Los Angeles, where he told MTV's Simon Rex all about it. "I got this new project coming out along with some other brothers called *One Nation,*" he explained. "It's like an East Coast/West Coast collaboration. To kill this whole new vibe everybody wanna be on about it being a war between the East Coast and the West Coast. It's really just a problem with two rappers. And everybody wants to make it a bigger thing than it is."

With *One Nation* in production, and while continuing to record for *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory (Makaveli)*, Tupac would begin filming his next movie, *Gang Related,* in which he starred alongside Jim Belushi. With *Gang Related,* Tupac accomplished yet another goal he had set for himself. He wanted a $1 million paycheck, more than he'd ever been paid on any previous film. He was able to do this by negotiating a $750,000 fee for his acting role and an additional $250,000 to do the soundtrack. He had finally become a member of Hollywood's million-dollar club.

It had been eight months since he was released from Clinton Correctional Facility and not a second had been wasted. Tupac had recorded and released his most successful album to date. He had finished one film, was in production on the second, and was already reading scripts for the next. He was simultaneously recording two different albums, all while working toward his ultimate goal of building his own empire.

Tupac was grateful for what Death Row had provided him but was also ready to focus on his own company. By July, Tupac was so dedicated to building his new company that he rerouted his paychecks from *Gang Related* directly into his Euphanasia bank account. He was taking the necessary steps to be fully independent. "Tupac wanted to start his own company, and that's why he was doing what he was doing with Death Row, to make that money that he needed," George Pryce, his publicist, said.

With Euphanasia up and running, Tupac's next step was to start his own production company. When he came up with the idea of releasing a documentary modeled after Madonna's *Truth or Dare,* the first person he wanted to reach out to was Tracy Robinson, someone he had worked with earlier in his career. Tracy jumped at the opportunity. She, along with her partner, Gobi Rahimi, produced and even did some directing with Tupac on his music videos for Death Row Records: “2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted,” “How Do U Want It,” “All Bout U,” “Hit ’Em Up,” and “Made Niggaz.” It quickly became clear to him that he wanted to expand the relationship, and he formed his new production company with Tracy and Gobi as partners.

Tupac named the company 24/7, inspired by his twenty-four-hour, seven-days-a-week work schedule. This move got him one step closer to his ultimate goal of independence. He saw no reason to let any outside production company get paid for his music videos or future films when he could do it himself.

In addition to being in front of the camera, he also wanted to expand into writing, producing, and directing. Even before forming 24/7, Tupac had written several screenplays, including two that he wrote while on trial and in prison, *Live 2 Tell* and *Shadow of Doubt/Manchild*. He also conceptualized two story ideas, titled *Bedlum* and *Real Love*. Along with his documentary, he wanted to make a Nat Turner biopic. For another one of his film projects, he scheduled a meeting and first writing session with an all-female writing team. The idea was to identify and break down societal stereotypes with the end goal of the viewing audience finding more common ground with one another.

Tupac’s ambitions didn’t stop with music and film. To build his empire, he planned to expand across multiple industries.

On his to-do list:

- Makaveli Records.
- Restaurants: Powamekka Café, Playaz Club & Around the World Cafe.
- Fashion line: Dadanani (partnership with Kidada).
- Videogame: *Tupac and the Outlawz,* with their special powers, fight against the enemy.
- Publishing company: books and magazines, autobiography titled *Mama’s Boy,* and a self-help book titled *How to Get Out of the Ghetto.*
- Music publishing company: signing producers to his roster.

- Cookbook: A collection of recipes. He wanted to ask different rap artists to share their favorite recipes from their mothers or grandmothers and donate the proceeds to charity.
- Cartoon: *Tupac and the Outlawz,* a *Fat Albert*–style weekly kids' show.
- Radio show: He and guest artists discuss current topics and their common love of *all* genres of music, not just hip-hop.
- Fan club: A monthly newsletter to share personal stories about himself, the Outlawz, and his inner circle. His intention was to create an even more personal connection with his fans.
- A youth softball league called "Youthanasia": The formation of a youth softball league where hip-hop artists would volunteer their time and coach youth from underserved communities.
- A Place Called Home: A charity concert to raise money for the community center A Place Called Home.
- 1-800 call center: A toll-free telephone line that children anywhere in America could call if they needed help with anything—bullying, financial aid, domestic abuse, mental health, transportation, or any problems that they were afraid to discuss with family and friends.
- Politics: Although Tupac believed he could never win a presidential bid, he talked about his plans to get involved in politics and thought becoming mayor one day was a definite possibility.

Tupac's big-picture plans were not limited to business only. The whirlwind that was once his lifestyle had temporarily subsided. During the day, when he was on set or at the recording studio, the family hung around the house, cooking and watching TV. At night, when Tupac came home, he sat in the living room, in front of the TV, anchored to the black leather sectional, watching MTV, BET, or his unreleased videos and movies. No matter what he was watching, though, there would be a television on in one of the rooms with the news blaring. He was always deeply interested in current events, locally, nationally, and around the world, but especially stories about crime in disenfranchised communities.

As the summer neared its end, evenings at the Calabasas house turned to nice, quiet nights. His fast-lane life was catching up with him. One night in August he told the family he'd bought a diamond ring and planned to ask Kidada to be his wife. There would be no fancy proposal, no audience or cameras around, just a private moment shared between the two.

He saw a future with Kidada. He saw children. He even built dog pens in the backyard of his house. He wanted a house full of kids and was thrilled to have his nieces, Imani and Nzingha, with him as much as possible. He had been especially elated by the arrival of his nephew, Malik, five months before. He was always excited to come home after a long day of filming and recording to a house filled with his family, especially the babies. He would teach Malik to crawl, and play with them and tease them until they giggled. Jamala recalled, “He enjoyed the fact that when he came home, he immediately heard voices when he opened the door. He loved the fact that there were toys on the floor to trip over. He wanted nothing more than to make his house into a home.”

Playtime would only get more exciting when Tupac pointed out the stains from melted ice pops all over his white carpet. Through his laughter, he’d ask, “What the hell is goin’ on here?” pretending to be angry as their little faces looked up at him in anticipation. “Y’all need to get a job to pay for the carpet cleaner! Every week we have to get these carpets cleaned ’cause of these Icees!” The kids would continue to stare up at him, wide-eyed, hoping he’d playfully chase them around the house. “Do you think I work this hard to pay for your mess? Huh? Do you? Y’all need to get a job.” Tupac would try not to crack a smile when he looked into their innocent eyes. “The main reason he wanted all of us there was because he wanted the kids there,” Jamala recalls.

A quick break from his around-the-clock meetings and recording studio sessions led him to an August night out at the House of Blues on Sunset in Hollywood to see his childhood idol, LL Cool J. After Outkast opened the show, Tupac left the VIP section and met up with Shock G and Money-B in the general admission section. The three of them stood together, leaning up against the wall, Tupac in the middle. When LL walked onstage, the crowd went wild. A steady stream of fans shoved and slithered through the crowd past Tupac. While some did a surprised double take as they walked by, others smiled warmly at them or asked for a photo. A few girls screamed in disbelief, not at the legend with the Kangol hat onstage but at the surprise sighting of Tupac Shakur and the legendary Shock G—Humpty Hump himself—hanging out in general admission.

He and Shock caught up like the old friends they were. Shock told Tupac, “Man, our fuckin’ deal with Tommy Boy went sour.”

“Yeah, man, shit! I gotta go to court tomorrow. Tryin’ to make a nigga do some community service and shit,” Tupac mumbled, speaking of the Caltrans community service he was required to do for a battery and weapons charge from years before.

“I got a beat for ya,” offered Shock.

“For real? Get it to me,” Tupac yelled over the loud music.

“I saw that video that you did. That shit was hot,” Shock said. “What’s it like fuckin’ with Suge?”

“Oh, it’s cool. By the way, tell Atron I say what’s up.”

As September fast approached, Tupac’s home was filled almost beyond capacity with family members and friends. So when the house across the street posted a for-sale sign, he knew he had to buy it. Even though Afeni, Sekyiwa, and her children were settled in Atlanta and enjoying their regular visits to California, he knew if a house became available in his neighborhood, it could help ease them into a truly bicoastal lifestyle. Tupac had hopes to ultimately purchase six more houses on his street or the surrounding streets in the neighborhood. One house would be for the Outlawz. One or two of the houses would be guest houses for visiting family, friends, and artists. He wanted one of the homes to become his office and recording studio. And one house would be designated for Glo, who was scheduled to move from Georgia the first week of September. Tupac had already moved Mutah’s fourteen-year-old brother, Kamil, out from New Jersey and had started the process of becoming his legal guardian. His plan was for Kamil to live in the house with Glo and T.C.

What once were mere hopes and dreams were now becoming his reality.

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On September 4, Tupac boarded a flight to New York, where he would be presenting at the annual MTV Music Awards. Mutah, Yaki, and Young Noble, the newest member of the Outlawz, accompanied him. He was looking forward to making the trip, although still exhausted from his packed workweek, and was scheduled to be in Las Vegas three days later for a Mike Tyson fight. Security was always a concern of Tupac's, and he wasn't sure how he'd be received. He hoped it would be a positive trip, but he made sure he traveled with a large group of friends and associates for assurance. "I had twenty cats from my block with us," recalls Mutah. When Tupac and Snoop took the stage to present an award that night, slurs and threats flew from the guests in the front row of the audience.

When he came offstage, Tupac was upset. And though he tried to maintain his composure, he was anxious to find out who was mouthing off.

Minutes later, Nas and Tupac stood face-to-face outside the auditorium, each with his own band of young brothers waiting to defend. The air was thick with tension from the history of insults between the two men. It could have turned ugly, but luckily both Tupac and Nas, driven by the mutual respect they held for each other, found a way to calm things. Instead of allowing the situation to escalate into violence that night, the two talked.

Ever since their first meeting, years earlier, on the campus of Howard University at the school's homecoming celebrations, Nas's respect for Tupac had grown. "I saw Tupac talking to some girls, and I handed him a Hennessy bottle," remembered Nas of that night at Howard. "I probably shouldn't have had it with me, because I was on campus, but he took it and turned it bottom up. He kept reciting one of my rhymes off my first single over and over again—a song called 'Half Time.' 'When it's my time to go, I'll wait for God.' He loved that line."

So at the MTV Music Awards, the intense acrimony of recent times had not dissolved that mutual respect. The desire to reconcile came through. Nas recalled, "We had a great convo. He explained that he thought I was dissin' him on the song "The Message." I had heard that he was dissin' me at clubs. He's like, 'Yo, Nas, we're brothers, man, we're not supposed to go through this.' And I was like, 'That's what I'm sayin'.' "

While he and Nas spoke, Tupac confessed that he'd disrespected Nas in a few songs that he'd recently recorded for his Makaveli album. He promised Nas that he would take the songs off the album before the release.

Tupac also talked about the possibilities of them meeting in Vegas. “He believed that we were the two to bring it all together,” Nas remembered. “I was so excited that he said that, ’cause I felt like in a way we were kindred spirits. The beef was never supposed to happen between us.”

After a brief appearance at the awards show after-party, Tupac was ready to go, but his limo hadn’t been called. He decided that since the Essex House Hotel Nikko wasn’t far, he would walk. He wanted to bask in the New York night air. Since he and Nas had made peace, he felt even more confident in what the future held.

As the Outlawz and Suge hung close to Tupac, the small pack of random fans and people trailing him soon grew to at least fifty as they walked along the New York sidewalks. “A lot of people were givin’ a lot of love, like, ‘Welcome back, Pac,’ ” Mutah recalls. And Tupac returned the love. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of hundred-dollar bills, and started handing out money. He once again felt embraced by New York City. “He gave out at least two thousand dollars to the homeless and to people on the street that night…just giving out money,” Mutah said.

While he was in New York, Tupac decided to contact Keisha. Their decision to end their marriage had not ended their friendship, and the two had kept in touch. He called her once he landed and the two planned to meet. They were both happy to reconnect and catch up on each other’s lives. Tupac told her that night he was going to leave Death Row to pursue his acting career. As soon as he touched down in New York, it was time to head back home. The trip had been exactly what he’d hoped for.

After he returned to Los Angeles, on Friday, September 6, Tupac went straight to the studio to record “Let’s Get It On,” a song for heavyweight champion Mike Tyson. Tyson and Tupac had become friends and confidants over the years, bonding over similar adversities they both faced in their lives. Tyson asked Tupac to record a song for him to enter the ring to before his widely publicized fight in Las Vegas the following evening against Bruce Seldon. Scott Gutierrez was engineering that day. “[Tupac] comes out the limo…walks in the door, says, ‘What’s up?’ ” Gutierrez remembered. “Started playin’ the beat, [he] says turn it up. Cranked it up for him. Let him feel it….[He] had everything—pad and paper in his hand. [He says,] 'Yo, roll a blunt. Where's my Hennessy? Let's do it.' Less than twenty minutes from the time the man walked into the door to the time he walked out of that room, twenty minutes, that song was done….[He says,] 'I'll be back Sunday.' "

A few hours later he was back at his home in Calabasas complaining because he did not want to go to Las Vegas. He had just returned from a quick cross-country turnaround; the last thing he wanted to do was get in the car for a five-hour road trip. He wanted to rest. He wanted to kick off his shoes, eat some of Jamala's fried chicken, and zone out in front of the television. "Pac didn't want to go. He was tired from his trip to New York and said it would be too hot in Vegas to wear his bulletproof vest," Jamala recalled. But when Suge called him, he was able to convince him to go.

Tupac, Malcolm, Yaki, and Katari gathered their things while Suge waited patiently in his car. Jamala was so excited that she had been invited to join them, she was already packed and ready to go. Jamala's daughter, Imani, stood beside them. "I wanna go," she cried.

"No, baby, we'll be back tomorrow," Jamala promised.

"No," Imani cried. "I wanna go with you."

By the time Tupac came out the front door with his things, Imani was on the verge of tears.

"What's wrong?" Tupac asked.

"Imani wants to go," Jamala told him.

"Mani, we'll bring you something back," he said to appease her.

Imani didn't want to hear that. She said she wanted to go too. She burst into tears.

"Mani, don't cry! We'll bring you something," Tupac said. He knelt down to look her directly in the eyes. "What do you want us to bring you back?"

Through her tears, she pleaded, "A cheeseburger."

"Okay, we promise that we will definitely bring you a cheeseburger," Tupac said.

Imani stopped crying, but the tears were still streaming down her pretty brown cheeks.

Tupac and Malcolm got into the black Lexus Coupe, Malcolm in the driver's seat, Tupac on the passenger's side. Jamala would ride with Kidada in the back seat. Katari and Yaki jumped in the car behind Suge's with a few others. Tupac and Jamala waved to Imani, who stood at the door with Mutah and Noble. "Before that, Imani had never cried that much when we left anywhere. It was very strange," Jamala remembers.

—

The caravan had grown to well over ten cars by the time they pulled onto Interstate 10, and headed east. Death Row attorney David Kenner met up with them along the way. They cruised at speeds as high as 100 mph, swooping in and out of lanes, playing tag team, and racing each other. They drove as if the roads were theirs. "I thought we were gonna die," Jamala recalled. "I thought death was gonna be right there on that freeway."

Tupac sat in the front seat, fidgeting with the stereo, flipping through the magazines he'd just picked up, and spitting sunflower-seed shells out the half-open window. His own voice blared back at him through the stereo speakers. He fast-forwarded through some songs and rapped along with his new song, "Life of an Outlaw":

In this life we live as thugs…

Then he mumbled to himself, but loud enough for everyone in the car to hear, "Ooooh, damn, I'm so dope." Tupac's self-praise was always followed by a burst of subdued laughter.

Every now and then he would turn toward the back seat to ask if anyone needed anything. The bustle of Los Angeles gave way to the suburbs, and then the desert as they drove, listening to music and enjoying being together.

Once they arrived in Las Vegas, Tupac's car and half of the caravan behind them headed straight for the Luxor Hotel. They checked into their suites and settled into their rooms. The Outlawz had their own suite, and Jamala shared a connecting suite with Tupac and Kidada. Jamala dropped her bags and headed back toward the door, eager to get out to the casinos.

Tupac stopped her. "Uh, no. You ain't goin' nowhere."

"What?" Jamala asked, confused, wondering what he could possibly be talking about. "For real?"

"Naw, I don't want you all going out there," Tupac said. "It's too dangerous." Then he said, point-blank, "For real, it's crazy out there." He disregarded her frown and her stark look of disappointment, changed his clothes, and walked out the door.

Minutes later, Tupac appeared at the MGM arena with Suge by his side. Tupac blended in with the NBA stars, fellow rappers, and A-list actors who shared the VIP section. As Mike Tyson walked into the arena, Tupac's music blared over the PA system.

Tyson knocked his opponent out after a mere 109 seconds.

As Tupac and his group filed out, he hugged Tyson in celebration. Then he pranced through the lobby of the MGM Grand Hotel, proud of his friend's quick victory knockout. When he saw a camera crew ahead, he walked toward it. "Did y'all see that? Fifty punches, I counted 'em!"

But Tupac's celebratory mood was abruptly interrupted. One of the men in their entourage, Trevon "Tray" Lane, pointed out a man standing near the elevator. It was Orlando Anderson, an L.A. Crip who, just weeks before, had ripped a medallion from Lane's neck at the Lakewood Mall in Southern California.

Seeing Anderson made Tupac furious. Once again, he wanted to take justice into his own hands. Just as he had done long ago on tour when someone stole Chuck D's jacket. Just as he had done in Atlanta when the off-duty cop punched the innocent driver. Just as he did in Marin City when a white man called another passenger on the bus a racial slur. Tupac's adrenaline raced. He rushed toward Anderson and knocked him to the ground. Four or five of Tupac's associates jumped in as well. They proceeded to hit and kick Anderson. MGM Grand's hotel security converged on the scene and peeled the men off one another.

Minutes later, he walked through the door to his suite at the Luxor.

Jamala was ready to go to the club. She had been locked up in the room with nowhere to go, and only room service, a minibar, and a remote control to get her through the night.

Tupac quickly changed out of his silk dress shirt and matching Hush Puppies and slid into a green basketball jersey. He glanced in the mirror and then fixed his medallion, checking to see if the safety pin was still intact, holding it together. The gold medallion was encrusted with diamonds, and Makaveli spelled out in rubies, with a raised engraving of the Euphanasia logo.

Jamala met Tupac at the door.

Tupac looked at her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Wait, I can't go to the party?" Jamala asked.

"Nope," Tupac replied. He was adamant. Tupac was not going to let his cousin step outside their hotel room and into the path of possible danger.

"Are you serious?" Jamala asked.

No response. Tupac was gone.

It was a few minutes past ten P.M. when Tupac jumped into Suge's BMW and headed to Suge's Las Vegas house so the Death Row CEO could change. Then they headed to Suge's club, Club 662. Again, a caravan of cars followed. Tupac sat in the passenger seat, his window down as they inched through the Las Vegas Boulevard traffic, passing hordes of people on the sidewalks. An hour later, they were still inching along.

When they made a turn onto Flamingo Road, the light ahead turned red.

Suge slowed to a stop.

A late-model Cadillac pulled up beside the BMW.

The windows were down.

There were no words exchanged.

Only silence. Until a passenger in the back seat of the car aimed a high-caliber weapon directly at Tupac.

The loud report of the .40 caliber Glock pistol pierced the cold night air. Bullets ripped through the side of the black BMW and into the tires. Tupac jumped from the front seat into the back, desperate to dodge the gunfire and survive. Bullets tore through Tupac's body. His hip-abdomen area. His right hand. And his chest.

As a bullet fragment grazed Suge's head, he stomped on the accelerator, whipping the car around to make a U-turn. He squinted through the shattered windshield and tried to navigate the car, which now had two flat tires from the gunfire. They made it a little more than half a mile when a third tire blew out. Tupac was gasping for air. Seconds later, the police stopped them. A siren wailed in the distance as the police officers drew their guns and aimed them at the car. The Cadillac with the assailants was long gone.

The ambulance arrived and the paramedics carefully laid Tupac's wounded body onto a stretcher. He was struggling to breathe and keep his eyes open. His clothes and the sheet of the cot were soaked with the blood that seeped from his wounds. Within minutes they made it to the University Medical Center hospital.

Jamala, still unaware of what had happened, received a phone call from Yaasmyn, who was notified by Tupac's bodyguard. Immediately, Jamala and Kidada rushed to the hospital. The news was grim. While Jamala signed the next-of-kin papers, she waited for everyone to arrive.

Standing by her cousin's bedside, Jamala told him she loved him and prayed that he'd make it. She recalled, "He was out. That's when I knew. I thought that if he was gonna make it out of this, it was gonna be a long road. It wasn't like the shooting in New York. He had tubes in his mouth. He couldn't talk. He couldn't move his body. I was scared."

Outside, just down the Strip, Las Vegas police pinned Katari, Yaki, and Malcolm, who had been in the car behind Tupac and Suge, up against a wall. They stood, hands in the air, worrying about the fate of their best friend, their cousin, their leader, while the police interrogated them about the shooting. The police held them on the street and hammered them with questions for hours. They punctuated their questions rhythmically with

“Your *friend* is dead. Your *homie* is down there *dead*.” The Outlawz kept silent. They were only worried about one thing—whether or not Tupac was alive.

In Georgia, Afeni and Sekyiwa scrambled through the darkness of their homes to answer ringing phones. Within hours, they boarded a plane. Glo and T.C., scheduled to move to California that weekend, were already en route from Georgia, their car filled with all their belongings, when a news alert came through their car radio: “Rapper Tupac Shakur was shot in Las Vegas.” Glo grabbed her cellphone and frantically dialed Tupac’s office number for assistance in changing their route and getting directions to the hospital.

In Los Angeles, Yaasmyn, Mutah, and Noble sped down the same highway that Tupac had traveled just hours before. They were all praying for a miracle.

As each family member converged upon Las Vegas and made it to Tupac’s bedside, they were greeted with a heartbreaking sight. He lay in the hospital bed in a medically induced coma, his head swollen and his body distended with fluid. Under a bandage, his right index finger was missing. White gauze was wrapped around his head and his body. A tangle of tubes connected his mouth, his nose, and his hand to ominous machinery.

Hours later, Afeni and Glo stood by his hospital bed. With their soothing voices, they assured Tupac that he was loved.

Right away, the family sent for Afeni and Glo’s cousin Barbara Jean. She was a healer and a minister. She came to pray over Tupac. She also brought “holy oil” to dab onto his face, but the nurses wouldn’t allow it. The doctors told Afeni that the bleeding had stopped and that since he was young he had a fifty-fifty chance. His body was rallying.

Gobi and Tracy, who had been there shooting footage for Tupac’s documentary, showed up the first morning with orange juice and breakfast for the family. Gobi recalled that in the middle of the week, Death Row received an anonymous call at the label’s L.A. headquarters. The caller threatened that someone was coming for Tupac and would be arriving in Las Vegas to “finish him off.” In response, Death Row posted security guards near Tupac's room, as did the Nation of Islam. But no one watched over Tupac like the Outlawz. They had been working in shifts. "Us Outlawz were there in twenty-four-hour shifts. It was serious," recalled Noble. "Each of us had a gun on us. We didn't get any sleep, no change of clothes, except going to the mall to buy us some drawers or something, but we was out there ready to go out with a blaze if somebody was gonna come to the hospital on some bullshit. Police wasn't takin' the threats seriously. We were up there like the damn military. In the daytime we were all there. At night we'd go in shifts. At four in the morning no one would be there except us. We would stand outside in the cut, watching everybody."

Yo-Yo, Tupac's close friend whom he'd met on tour with Digital Underground, stood beside him. "Pac, can you hear me?" she asked. Jasmine Guy and Snoop Dogg also came to see their friend and lend support.

The nurses noticed that the constant stream of visitors might impede Tupac's recovery and decided to create a schedule. Visitors were allowed two at a time, every three hours, for ten minutes. The hope was that the more time he was able to rest alone, the faster he would heal.

But Tupac didn't like to be alone.

Family members, Kidada, and close friends took turns spending as much time as they could with him. Not a single visiting window was missed.

That week, as Tupac lay in the hospital bed, he received a series of complicated operations; the second one involved the removal of a lung. The doctors assured Afeni that if he survived, he would be able to live a normal life.

When word got out that there was a chance that Tupac would survive and that he had briefly opened his eyes, hope filled the hearts of his fans across the world. The crowds outside the hospital increased. Reporters swooped in, harassing family members and close friends, doing anything they could to get the latest scoop on Tupac's grave condition. "It was a zoo, an absolute zoo," recalled Glo. "Reporters posing as friends, sitting next to you listening to your conversations. It was crazy."

Adoring fans and relentless reporters swarmed the hospital's parking lot, trying to get a glimpse of something or an inkling of breaking news. Even Billy Garland showed up, though he remained in the crowd.

On day six, the doctor put Tupac on dialysis as a preventive measure. He feared that Tupac's kidneys would fail. If this happened, his other organs would follow suit. The hope that had been looming throughout the hallways turned to concern.

The next day, on Friday, September 13, in the late hours of the afternoon, the doctors summoned Afeni from the private waiting room. Tupac's heart had stopped. The doctor told her that he'd had a series of heart attacks. They had tried to resuscitate him three times.

"No, don't do that," she pleaded. "Don't do that to my baby. Let him go. But please, can I have my sister go in to see him?"

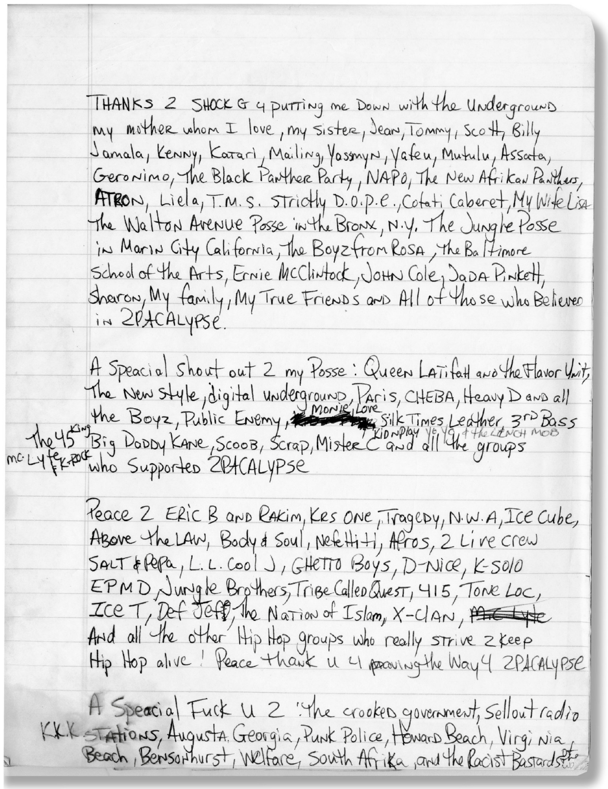
He asked them to wait until they cleaned him up and said that only Glo could go in after Tupac died.

At 4:03 P.M. Tupac surrendered to the angels that he had so often dreamed of. As the news spread, tears flooded the eyes of all who were in the waiting room. But Afeni didn't cry yet. A dark, all-consuming pain ripped through her, but her natural propensity to take care of others in pain, even on the worst day of her life, allowed her to comfort them with words of encouragement.

Minutes later, the doctors came to escort Glo into the room. As she stood above Tupac, looking down at him, she was brought back to the moment twenty-five years earlier, when she stood over his bed just minutes after he was born, when Afeni had asked her to go in and check on her newborn baby at Flower–Fifth Hospital. She kissed him now on his forehead as she did then, and stared down at him, admiring his beauty and his strength. He was at peace.

Trying not to cry, Glo spoke as much for Afeni as for herself in her final goodbye: "Okay, Darlin' Dear. Auntie Glo's here with you." The memories of her nephew's life washed through her mind, each moment as beautiful and colorful as the next. "Ain't nothin' else gonna happen to you now, okay? Auntie Glo is gonna promise you that. Now you go 'head and fly."

I do believe that Tupac lived twenty-five perfect years.
And I’m quite satisfied and proud of every day of his life.
—Afeni Shakur



THANKS 2 SHOCK G 4 putting me Down with the Underground
my mother whom I love, my sister, Jean, Tommy, Scott, Billy
Jamala, Kenny, Katari, Mailing, Yassmyn, Yafeu, Mutulu, Assata,
Geronimo, The Black Panther Party, NAPO, The New Afrikan Panthers,
ATRON, Liela, T.M.S. Strictly D.O.P.E., Cotati Caberet, My Wife Lisa
The Walton Avenue Posse in the Bronx, N.Y. The Jungle Posse
in Marin City California, The Boyz from Rosa, the Baltimore
School of the Arts, Ernie McClintock, John Cole, Jada Pinkett,
Sharon, My family, My True Friends and All of those who Believed
in 2PACALYPSE.

A Speacial Shout out 2 my Posse: Queen Latifah and the Flavor Unit,
The New style, digital underground, Paris, CHEBA, Heavy D and all
the Boyz, Public Enemy, [illegible] Monie Love, Silk Times Leather, 3rd Bass
The 45 King, Big Daddy Kane, Scoob, Scrap, Mister C, Kid N Play, Yo Yo, & the Lench Mob and all the groups
MC Lyte, K-Rock, who Supported 2PACALYPSE

Peace 2 Eric B and Rakim, KRS ONE, Tragedy, N.W.A, Ice Cube,
Above the Law, Body & Soul, Nefertiti, Afros, 2 Live crew
Salt & Pepa, L.L. Cool J, Ghetto Boys, D-Nice, K-Solo
EPMD, Jungle Brothers, Tribe Called Quest, 415, Tone Loc,
Ice T, Def Jeff, the Nation of Islam, X-Clan, ~~MC Lyte~~
And all the other Hip Hop groups who really strive 2 keep
Hip Hop alive! Peace thank u 4 paving the Way 4 2PACALYPSE

A Speacial Fuck U 2: The crooked government, Sellout radio
KKK, stations, Augusta Georgia, Punk Police, Howard Beach, Virginia
Beach, Bensonhurst, Welfare, South Afrika, and the Racist Bastards etc.

Whether it was for an album dedication or just a page of credits, Tupac often wrote full pages of thank-yous to the people he appreciated and loved.

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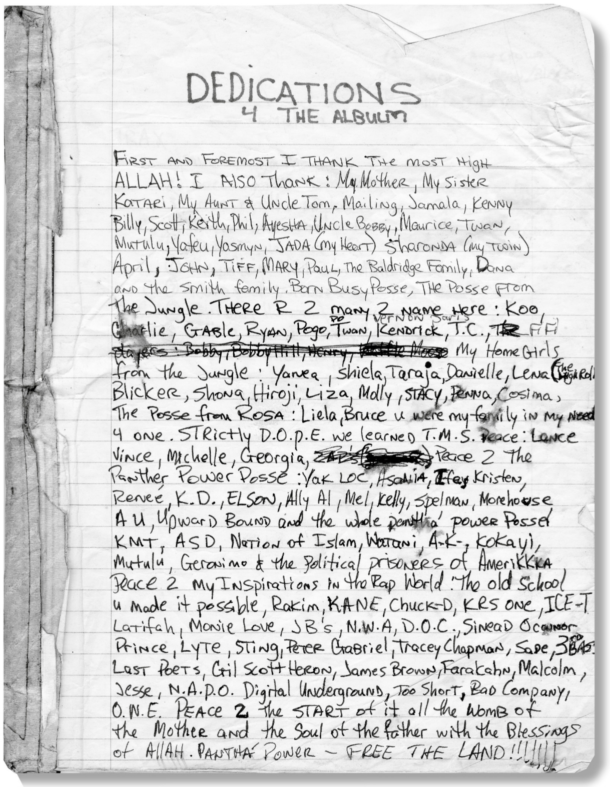

DEDICATIONS
4 THE ALBUM

FIRST AND FOREMOST I THANK THE MOST HIGH
ALLAH! I ALSO Thank: My Mother, My Sister
Katari, My Aunt & Uncle Tom, Mailing, Jamala, Kenny
Billy, Scott, Keith, Phil, Ayesha, Uncle Bobby, Maurice, Twan,
Mutulu, Yafeu, Yasmyn, JADA (my Heart) Sharonda (my twin)
April, JOHN, TIFF, MARY, Paul, The Baldridge Family, Dana
and the Smith family. Born Busy Posse, THE Posse From
The Jungle. THERE R 2 many 2 name here: Koo,
Charlie, GABLE, RYAN, Pogo, PO Twan, Vernon Saris Kendrick, T.C., ~~The~~ FiFi
~~players: Bobby, Bobby Hill, Henry, Little Moose~~ My Home Girls
from the Jungle: Yanea, Shiela, Taraja, Danielle, Lena (The High Rol
Blicker, Shona, Hiroji, Liza, Molly, STACY, Penna, Cosima,
The Posse from ROSA: Liela, Bruce u were my family in my need
4 one. STRictly D.O.P.E. we learned T.M.S. Peace: Lance
Vince, Michelle, Georgia, ~~ZAD's~~ ([illegible]) Peace 2 The
Panther Power Posse: Yak LOC, Asania, Efey Kristen,
Renee, K.D., ELSON, Ally Al, Mel, Kelly, Spelman, Morehouse
A U, Upward Bound and the whole pantha' power Posse
KMT, ASD, Nation of Islam, Watani, A-K-, Kokayi,
Mutulu, Geronimo & the Political prisoners of AmeriKKKa
Peace 2 My Inspirations in the Rap World: The old School
u made it possible, Rakim, KANE, Chuck-D, KRS ONE, ICE-T
Latifah, Monie Love, JB's, N.W.A, D.O.C., Sinead Oconnor
Prince, LYTE, STing, Peter Gabriel, Tracey Chapman, Sade, 3rd BAS
Last Poets, Gil Scott Heron, James Brown, Farakahn, Malcolm,
Jesse, N.A.P.O. Digital Underground, Too Short, Bad Company,
O.N.E. PEACE 2 the START of it all the womb of
the Mother and the Soul of the father with the Blessings
of Allah. PANTHA' Power – FREE THE LAND!!!!!!

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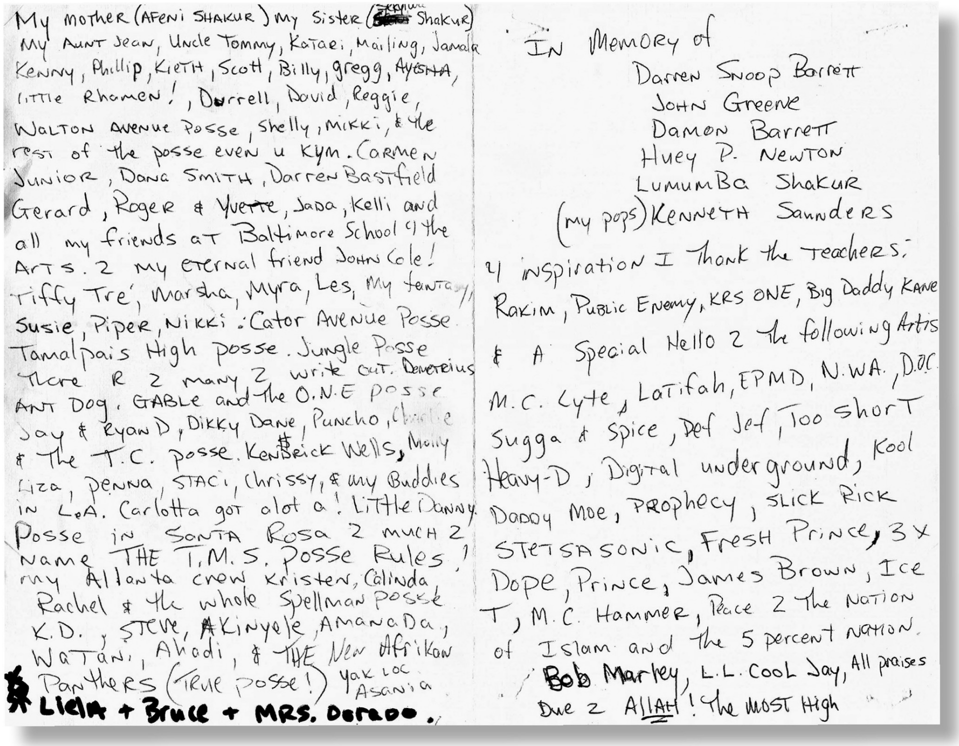

My mother (AFENI SHAKUR) My Sister (Sekyiwa Shakur)
My Aunt Jean, Uncle Tommy, Katari, Mailing, Jamala
Kenny, Phillip, Kieth, Scott, Billy, gregg, AYESHA,
little Rhamen!, Darrell, David, Reggie,
WALTON AVENUE Posse, Shelly, MIKKI, & the
rest of the posse even u KYM. Carmen
Junior, Dana Smith, Darren Bastfield
Gerard, Roger & Yvette, Jada, Kelli and
all my friends at Baltimore School 4 the
ArTS. 2 my eternal friend John Cole!
Tiffy Tre', Marsha, Myra, Les, My fantasy//
Susie, Piper, NIKKI. Cator Avenue Posse.
Tamalpais High posse. Jungle Posse
There R 2 many 2 write out. Demetrius
Ant Dog. GABLE and the O.N.E posse
Jay & Ryan D, Dikky Dane, Puncho, Charlie
& The T.C. posse. Kendrick Wells, Molly
Liza, Penna, STACI, Chrissy, & my Buddies
in L.A. Carlotta got alot a! Little Danny.
Posse in Santa Rosa 2 much 2
Name THE T.M.S. Posse Rules!
my Atlanta crew Kristen, Calinda,
Rachel & the whole Spellman posse
K.D., STEVE, Akinyele, AMANADA,
WaTani, Ahadi, & THE New Afrikan
Panthers (True posse!) Yak Loc
Asania
Leila + Bruce + MRS. Dorado.

IN Memory of
Darren Snoop Barrett
John Greene
Damon Barrett
Huey P. Newton
Lumumba Shakur
(my pops) Kenneth Saunders

4 inspiration I thank the teachers:
Rakim, Public Enemy, KRS ONE, Big Daddy Kane
& A Special Hello 2 the following Artis
M.C. Lyte, Latifah, EPMD, N.WA., D.O.C.
Sugga & Spice, Def Jef, Too Short
Heavy-D, Digital underground, Kool
Daddy Moe, Prophecy, Slick Rick
STETSASONIC, Fresh Prince, 3X
Dope, Prince, James Brown, Ice
T, M.C. Hammer, Peace 2 the Nation
of Islam and the 5 percent Nation.
Bob Marley, L.L. Cool Jay, All praises
Due 2 ALLAH! The Most High

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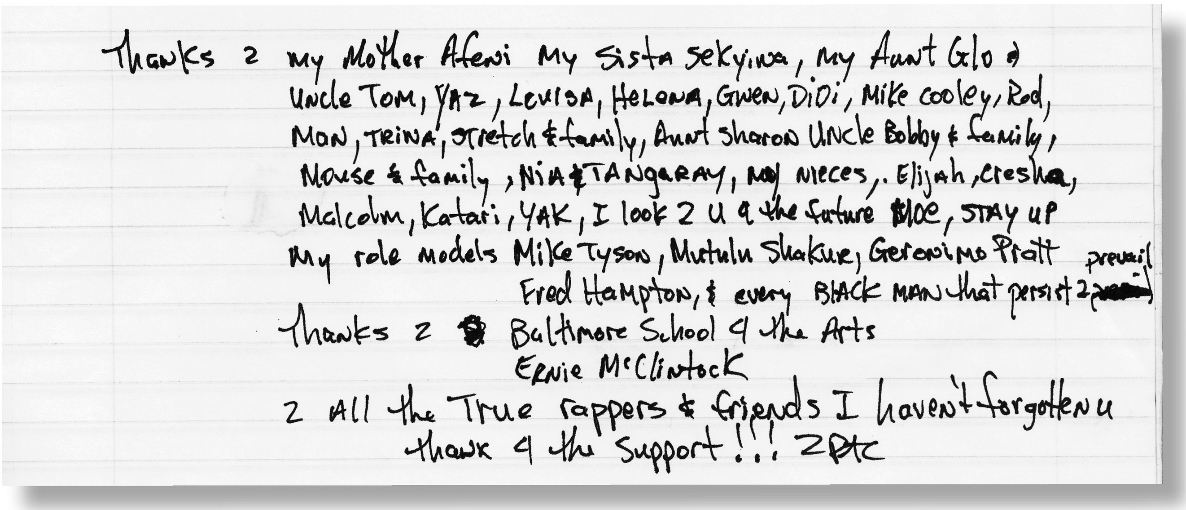

thanks 2 my Mother Afeni My Sista Sekyiwa, My Aunt Glo &
Uncle Tom, Yaz, Levisa, Helona, Gwen, DiDi, Mike cooley, Rod,
Mon, TRINA, Stretch & family, Aunt Sharon Uncle Bobby & family,
Mouse & family, NIA & TANGARAY, my nieces,. Elijah, Cresha,
Malcolm, Katari, YAK, I look 2 u 4 the future Moe, STAY UP
My role models Mike Tyson, Mutulu Shakur, Geronimo Pratt
Fred Hampton, & every BLACK MAN that persist 2 prevail
thanks 2 Baltimore School 4 the Arts
Ernie McClintock
2 All the True rappers & friends I haven't forgotten u
thank 4 the Support!!! 2Pac

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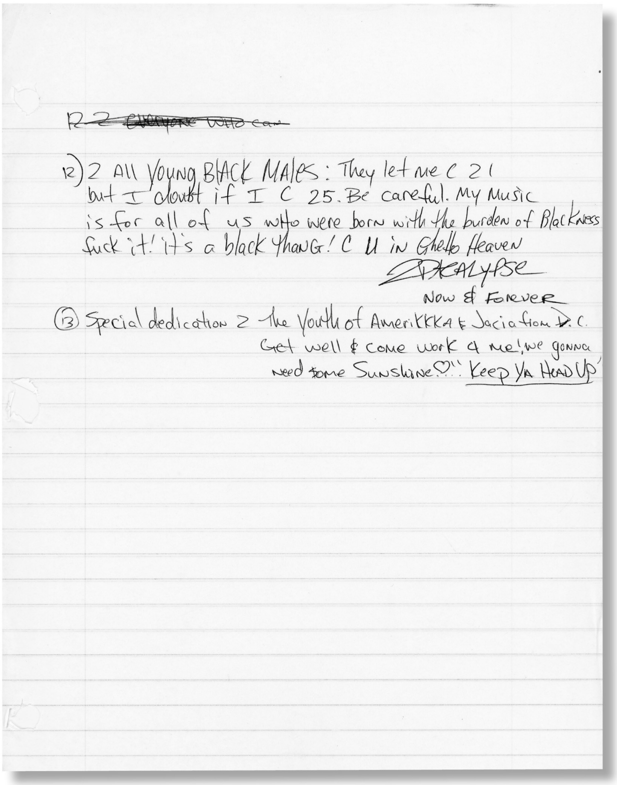

~~12 2 Everyone who can~~

12) 2 All Young BLACK Males: They let me C 21
but I doubt if I C 25. Be careful. My Music
is for all of us who were born with the burden of Blackness
fuck it! it's a black thanG! C U in Ghetto Heaven
2PACALYPSE
Now & Forever

⑬ Special dedication 2 the Youth of AmeriKKKA & Jacia from D.C.
Get well & come work 4 me! we gonna
need some Sunshine♡!! "Keep Ya Head Up"

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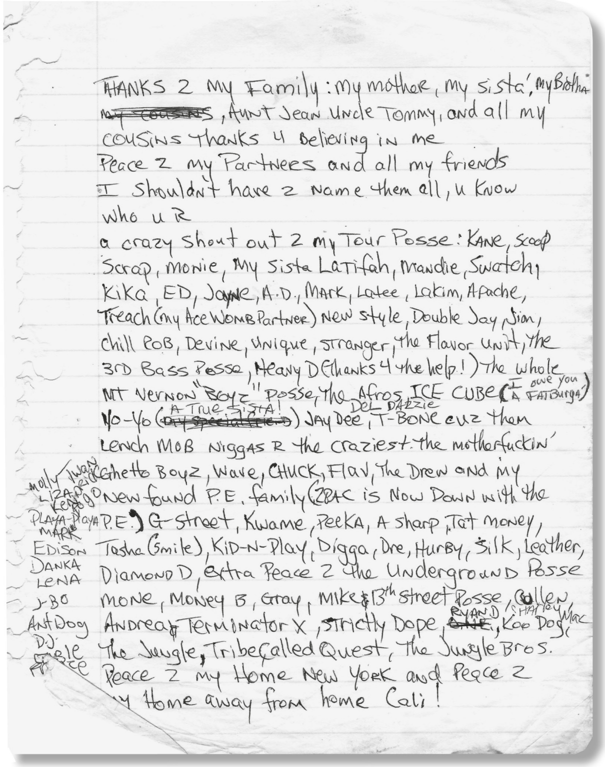

THANKS 2 my Family: my mother, my sista', my Brotha
~~my cousins~~, Aunt Jean Uncle Tommy, and all my
COUSINS Thanks 4 believing in me
Peace 2 my Partners and all my friends
I shouldn't have 2 name them all, u Know
who u R
a crazy shout out 2 my Tour Posse: Kane, Scoop
Scrap, monie, My Sista Latifah, Mandie, Swatch,
Kika, ED, Jayne, A.D., Mark, Latee, Lakim, Apache,
Treach (my Ace WOMB Partner) New style, Double Jay, Jion,
Chill Rob, Devine, Unique, Stranger, the Flavor Unit, the
3rd Bass Posse, Heavy D (thanks 4 the help!) The whole
Mt Vernon "Boyz" Posse, the Afros, ICE CUBE (I owe you A Fatburga)
Yo-Yo (~~my special friend~~ A True Sista!) Del Dazzie Jay Dee, T-BONE cuz them
Lench MOB Niggas R the craziest the motherfuckin'
Ghetto Boyz, Wave, CHUCK, Flav, The Drew and my
New found P.E. family (2PAC is Now Down with the
P.E.) G-Street, Kwame, Peeka, A sharp, Tat money,
Tasha (Smile), Kid-N-Play, Digga, Dre, Hurby, Silk, Leather,
Diamond D, extra Peace 2 the Underground Posse
Mone, Money B, Gray, Mike & 13th street Posse, Collen,
Andrea & Terminator X, Strictly Dope, ~~ONE~~ RYAN D, Sharley, Koo Dog, Mac,
The Jungle, Tribe Called Quest, The Jungle Bros.
Peace 2 my Home New York and Peace 2
my Home away from home Cali!

Molly
Iwan
Rick
Liza
Kendo
Playa-Playa
Mark
Edison
Danka
Lena
J-Bo
Ant Dog
D.J.
Eble
Ace

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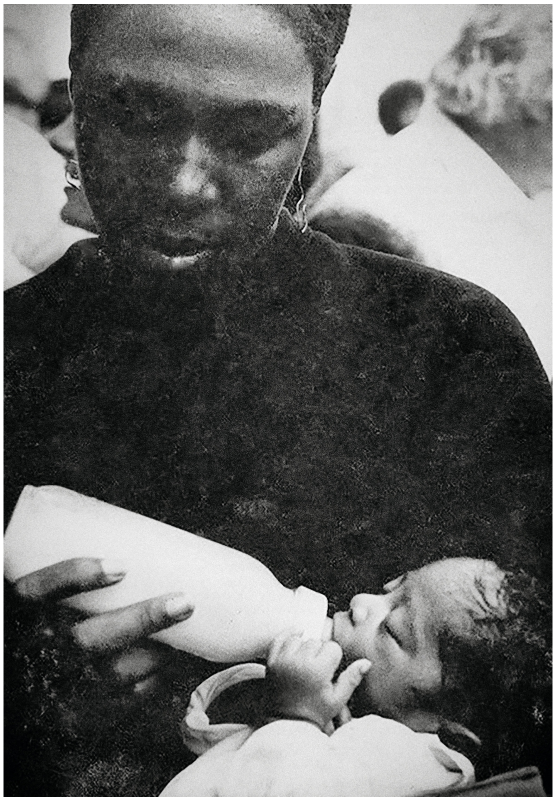
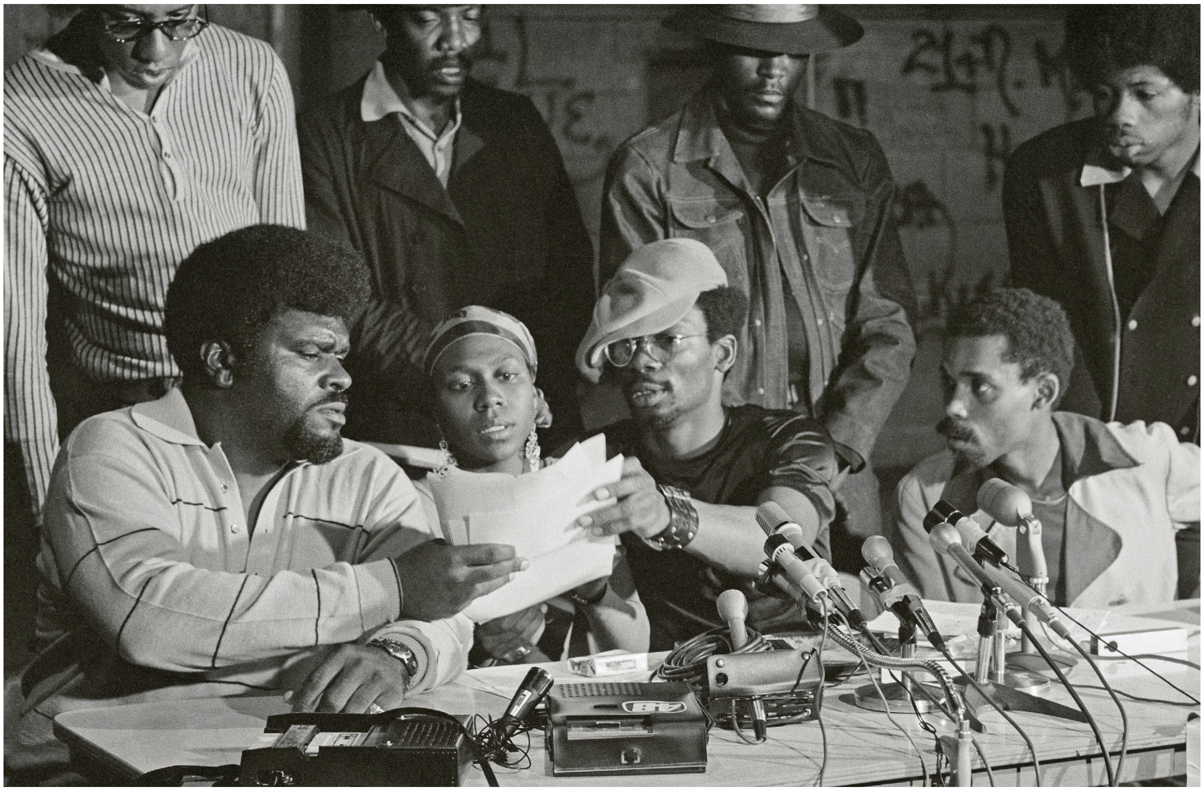
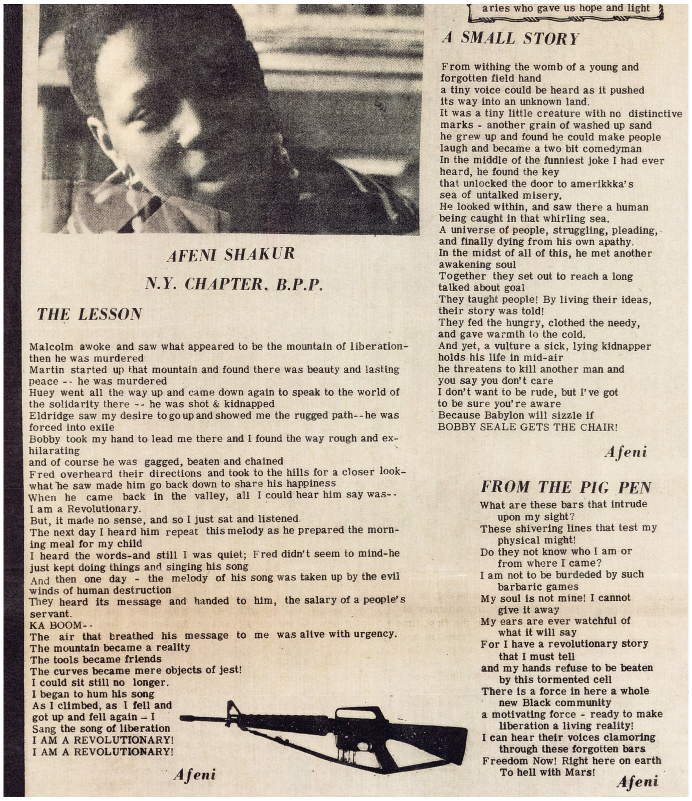


Afeni holding Tupac, 1971

Baby Tupac, 1972



Afeni at press conference, circa 1970



aries who gave us hope and light

AFENI SHAKUR

N.Y. CHAPTER, B.P.P.

THE LESSON

Malcolm awoke and saw what appeared to be the mountain of liberation-
then he was murdered
Martin started up that mountain and found there was beauty and lasting
peace -- he was murdered
Huey went all the way up and came down again to speak to the world of
the solidarity there -- he was shot & kidnapped
Eldridge saw my desire to go up and showed me the rugged path--he was
forced into exile
Bobby took my hand to lead me there and I found the way rough and exhilarating
and of course he was gagged, beaten and chained
Fred overheard their directions and took to the hills for a closer look-
what he saw made him go back down to share his happiness
When he came back in the valley, all I could hear him say was--
I am a Revolutionary.
But, it made no sense, and so I just sat and listened.
The next day I heard him repeat this melody as he prepared the morning
meal for my child
I heard the words-and still I was quiet; Fred didn't seem to mind-he
just kept doing things and singing his song
And then one day - the melody of his song was taken up by the evil
winds of human destruction
They heard its message and handed to him, the salary of a people's
servant.
KA BOOM--
The air that breathed his message to me was alive with urgency.
The mountain became a reality
The tools became friends
The curves became mere objects of jest!
I could sit still no longer.
I began to hum his song
As I climbed, as I fell and
got up and fell again – I
Sang the song of liberation
I AM A REVOLUTIONARY!
I AM A REVOLUTIONARY!

Afeni

A SMALL STORY

From withing the womb of a young and
forgotten field hand
a tiny voice could be heard as it pushed
its way into an unknown land.
It was a tiny little creature with no distinctive
marks - another grain of washed up sand
he grew up and found he could make people
laugh and became a two bit comedyman
In the middle of the funniest joke I had ever
heard, he found the key
that unlocked the door to amerikkka's
sea of untalked misery.
He looked within, and saw there a human
being caught in that whirling sea.
A universe of people, struggling, pleading,
and finally dying from his own apathy.
In the midst of all of this, he met another
awakening soul
Together they set out to reach a long
talked about goal
They taught people! By living their ideas,
their story was told!
They fed the hungry, clothed the needy,
and gave warmth to the cold.
And yet, a vulture a sick, lying kidnapper
holds his life in mid-air
he threatens to kill another man and
you say you don't care
I don't want to be rude, but I've got
to be sure you're aware
Because Babylon will sizzle if
BOBBY SEALE GETS THE CHAIR!

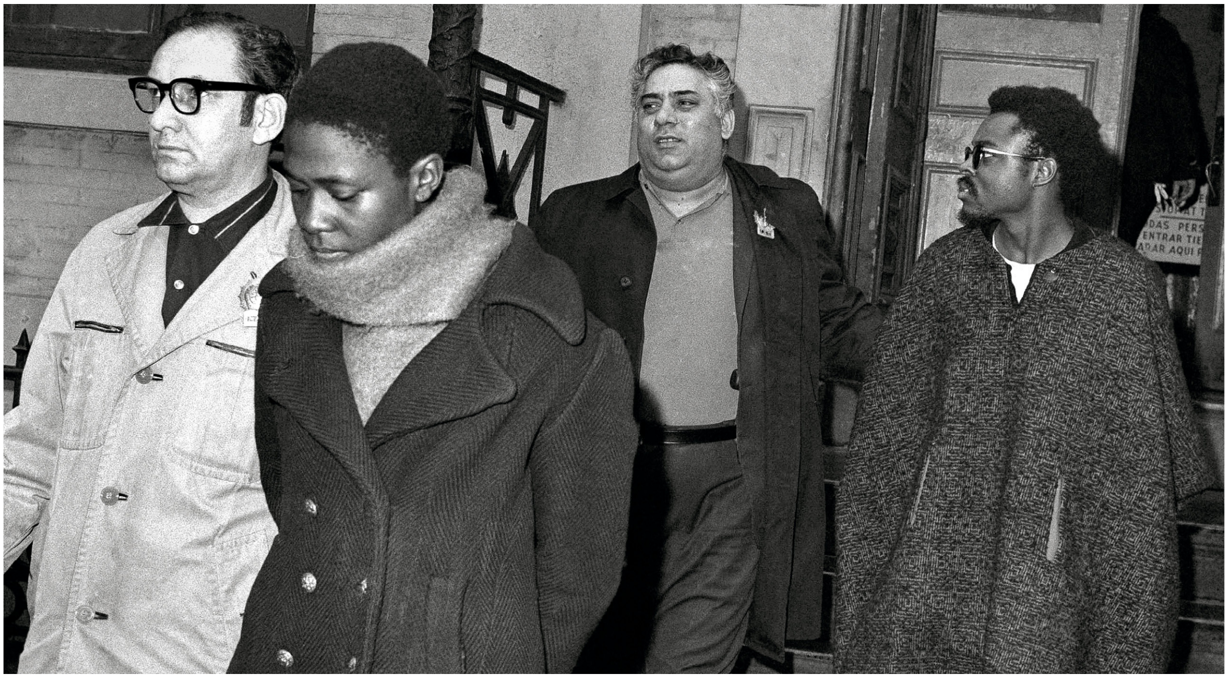
Afeni

FROM THE PIG PEN

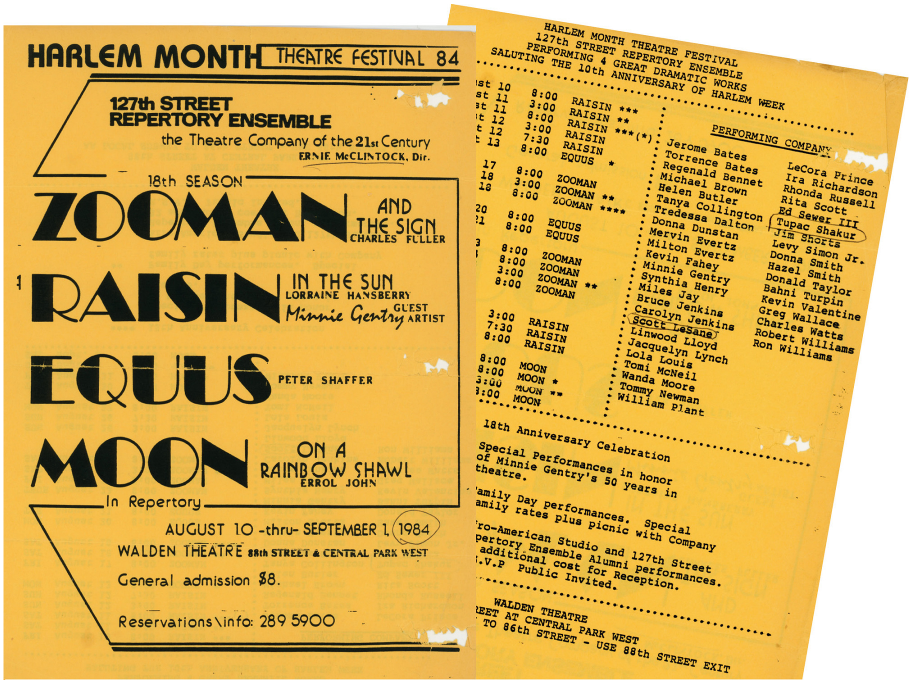
What are these bars that intrude
    upon my sight?
These shivering lines that test my
    physical might!
Do they not know who I am or
    from where I came?
I am not to be burdeded by such
    barbaric games
My soul is not mine! I cannot
    give it away
My ears are ever watchful of
    what it will say
For I have a revolutionary story
    that I must tell
and my hands refuse to be beaten
    by this tormented cell
There is a force in here a whole
    new Black community
a motivating force - ready to make
    liberation a living reality!
I can hear their voices clamoring
    through these forgotten bars
Freedom Now! Right here on earth
    To hell with Mars!

Afeni

Afeni's poetry



Arrested—Panther 21, New York, 1969



HARLEM MONTH THEATRE FESTIVAL 84

127th STREET
REPERTORY ENSEMBLE
the Theatre Company of the 21st Century
ERNIE McCLINTOCK, Dir.

18th SEASON

ZOOMAN AND THE SIGN
CHARLES FULLER

RAISIN IN THE SUN
LORRAINE HANSBERRY
Minnie Gentry GUEST ARTIST

EQUUS
PETER SHAFFER

MOON ON A RAINBOW SHAWL
ERROL JOHN

In Repertory

AUGUST 10 -thru- SEPTEMBER 1, 1984
WALDEN THEATRE 88th STREET & CENTRAL PARK WEST
General admission $8.

Reservations\info: 289 5900

HARLEM MONTH THEATRE FESTIVAL
127th STREET REPERTORY ENSEMBLE
PERFORMING 4 GREAT DRAMATIC WORKS
SALUTING THE 10th ANNIVERSARY OF HARLEM WEEK

ust 10 8:00 RAISIN ***
st 11 3:00 RAISIN **
st 11 8:00 RAISIN ***(*)
t 12 3:00 RAISIN
t 12 7:30 RAISIN
t 13 8:00 EQUUS *
17 8:00 ZOOMAN
18 3:00 ZOOMAN **
18 8:00 ZOOMAN ****
20 8:00 EQUUS
21 8:00 EQUUS
3 8:00 ZOOMAN
8:00 ZOOMAN
3:00 ZOOMAN **
8:00 ZOOMAN
3:00 RAISIN
7:30 RAISIN
8:00 RAISIN
8:00 MOON
8:00 MOON *
3:00 MOON **
3:00 MOON

PERFORMING COMPANY

Jerome Bates
Torrence Bates
Regenald Bennet
Michael Brown
Helen Butler
Tanya Collington
Tredessa Dalton
Donna Dunstan
Mervin Evertz
Milton Evertz
Kevin Fahey
Minnie Gentry
Synthia Henry
Miles Jay
Bruce Jenkins
Carolyn Jenkins
Scott LeSane
Linwood Lloyd
Jacquelyn Lynch
Lola Louis
Tomi McNeil
Wanda Moore
Tommy Newman
William Plant
LeCora Prince
Ira Richardson
Rhonda Russell
Rita Scott
Ed Sewer III
Tupac Shakur
Jim Shorts
Levy Simon Jr.
Donna Smith
Hazel Smith
Donald Taylor
Bahni Turpin
Kevin Valentine
Greg Wallace
Charles Watts
Robert Williams
Ron Williams

18th Anniversary Celebration

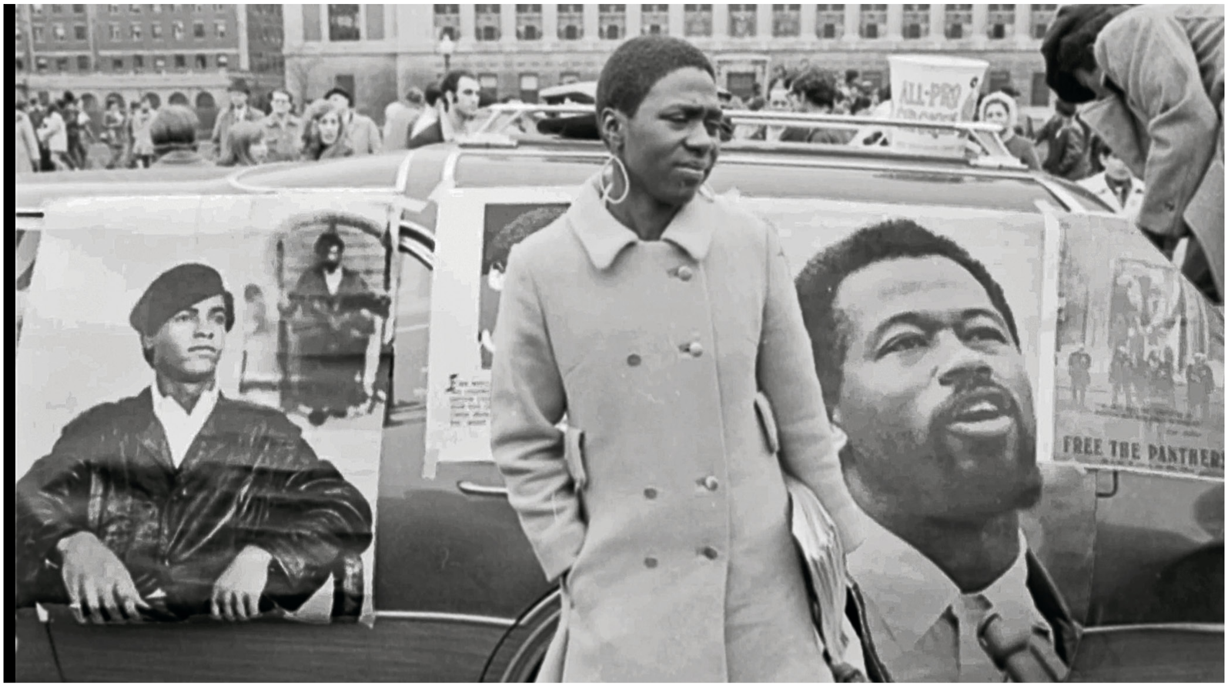
Special Performances in honor of Minnie Gentry's 50 years in theatre.

amily Day performances. Special amily rates plus picnic with Company

ro-American Studio and 127th Street pertory Ensemble Alumni performances. additional cost for Reception. .V.P Public Invited.

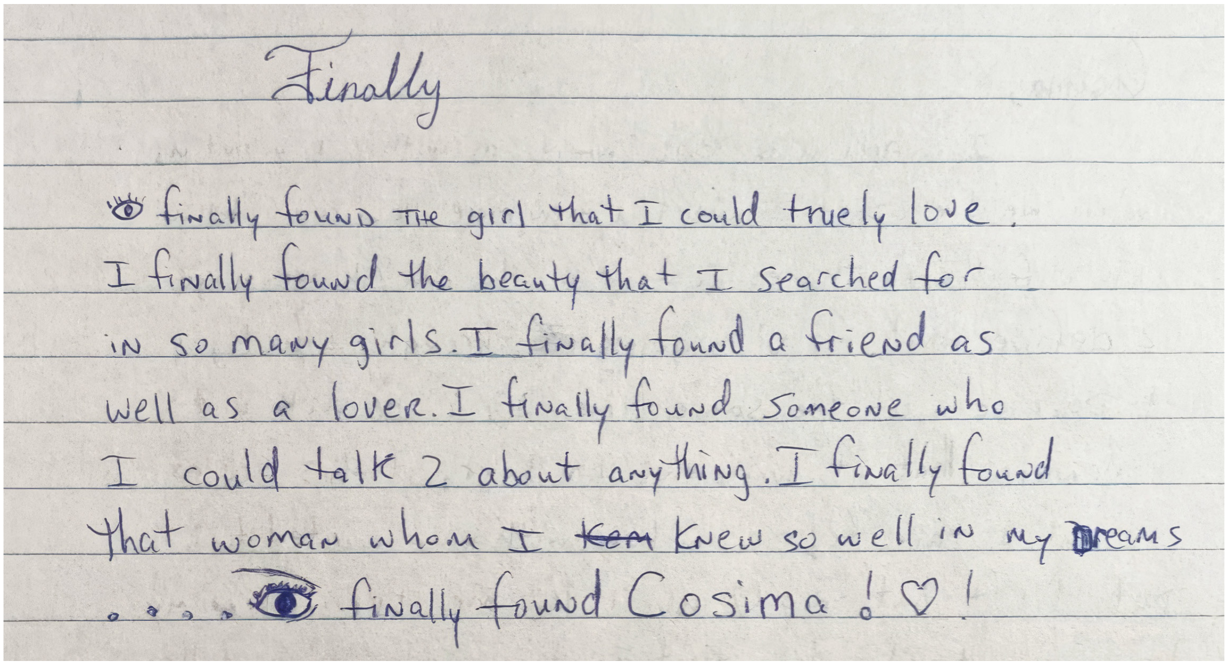
WALDEN THEATRE
REET AT CENTRAL PARK WEST
TO 86th STREET - USE 88th STREET EXIT

A Raisin in the Sun, 1984


ALL-PRO
FREE THE PANTHERS

Afeni, New York, circa 1970

Family photo, New York, 1976



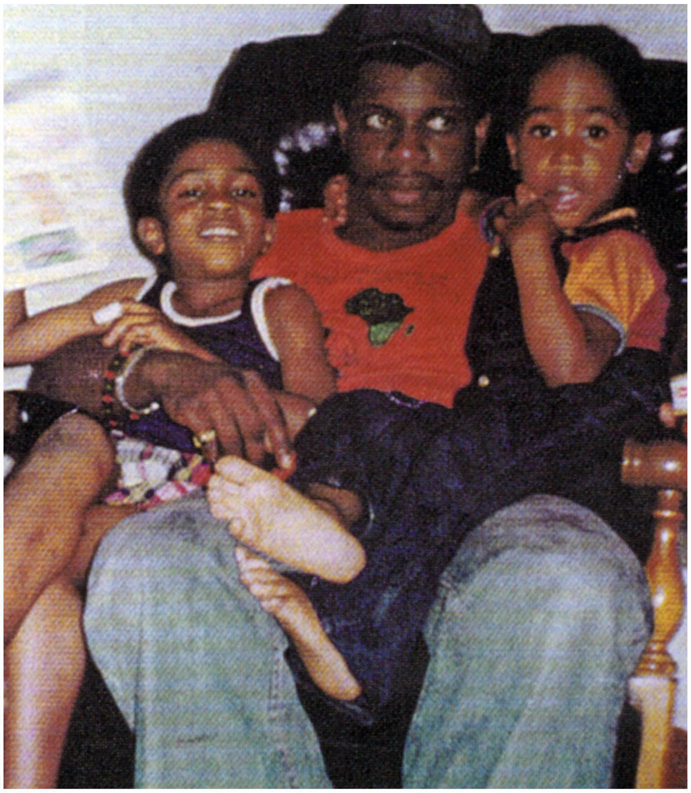
Finally

👁 finally found THE girl that I could truely love.
I finally found the beauty that I searched for
in so many girls. I finally found a friend as
well as a lover. I finally found someone who
I could talk 2 about anything. I finally found
that woman whom I ~~Kem~~ Knew so well in my dreams
. . . . 👁 finally found Cosima ! ♡ !

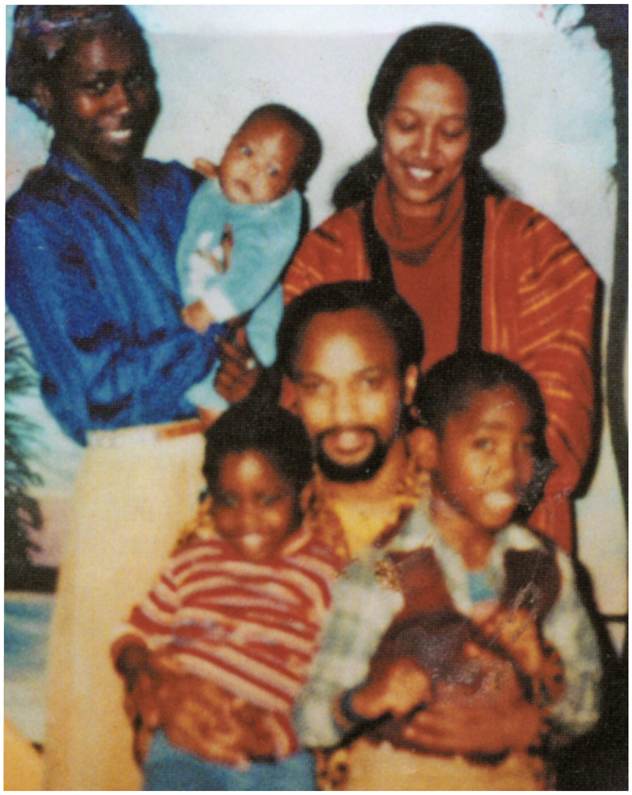
Love poem to Cosima

Young Tupac, already a leader

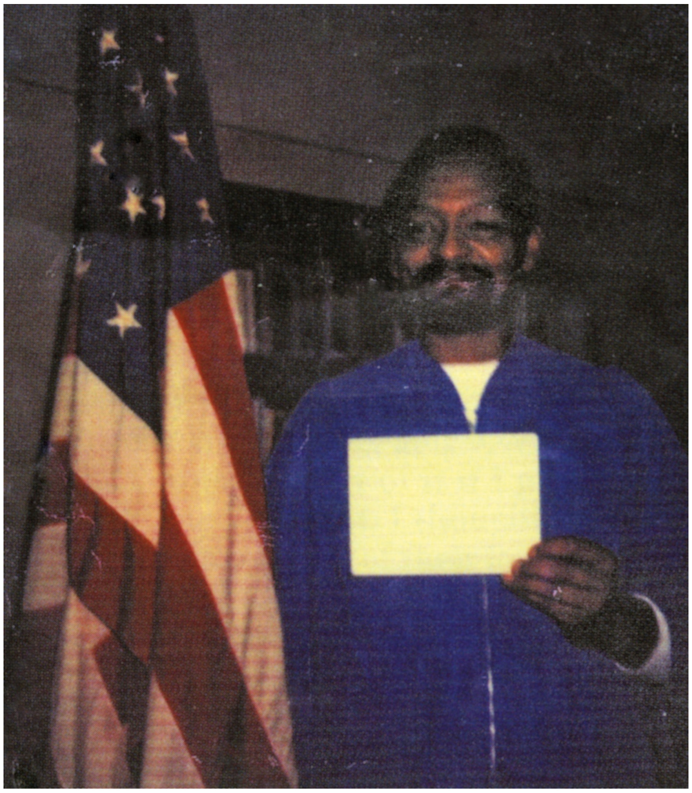
In the park, circa 1973



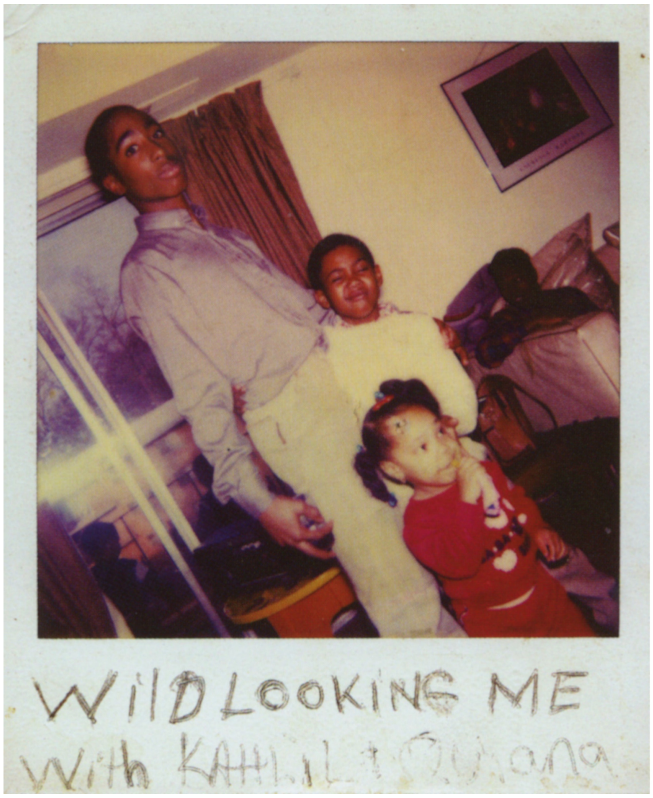
With Mutulu, circa 1975



Visiting Geronimo



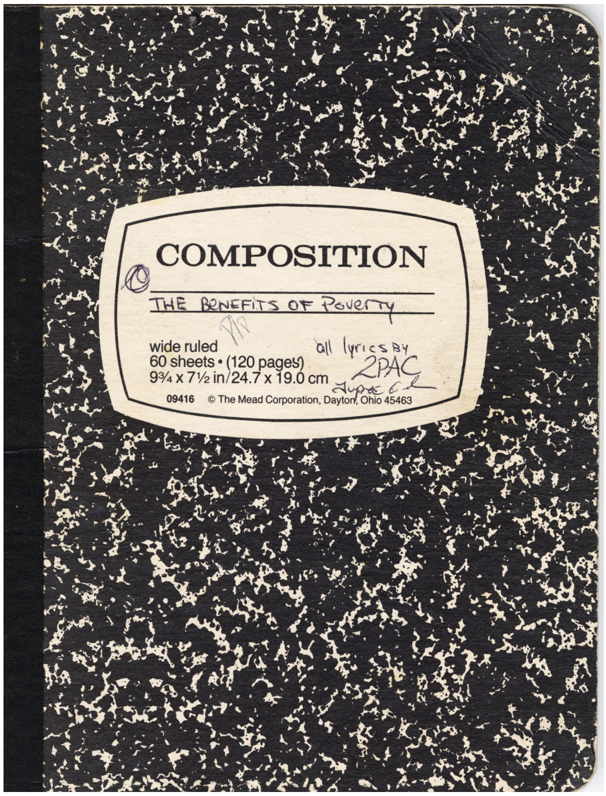
Kenneth "Legs" Saunders


WILD LOOKING ME
With KAHLIL + Quiana

Hanging out, 1986

With Jada, circa 1987

BSA, circa 1987



COMPOSITION

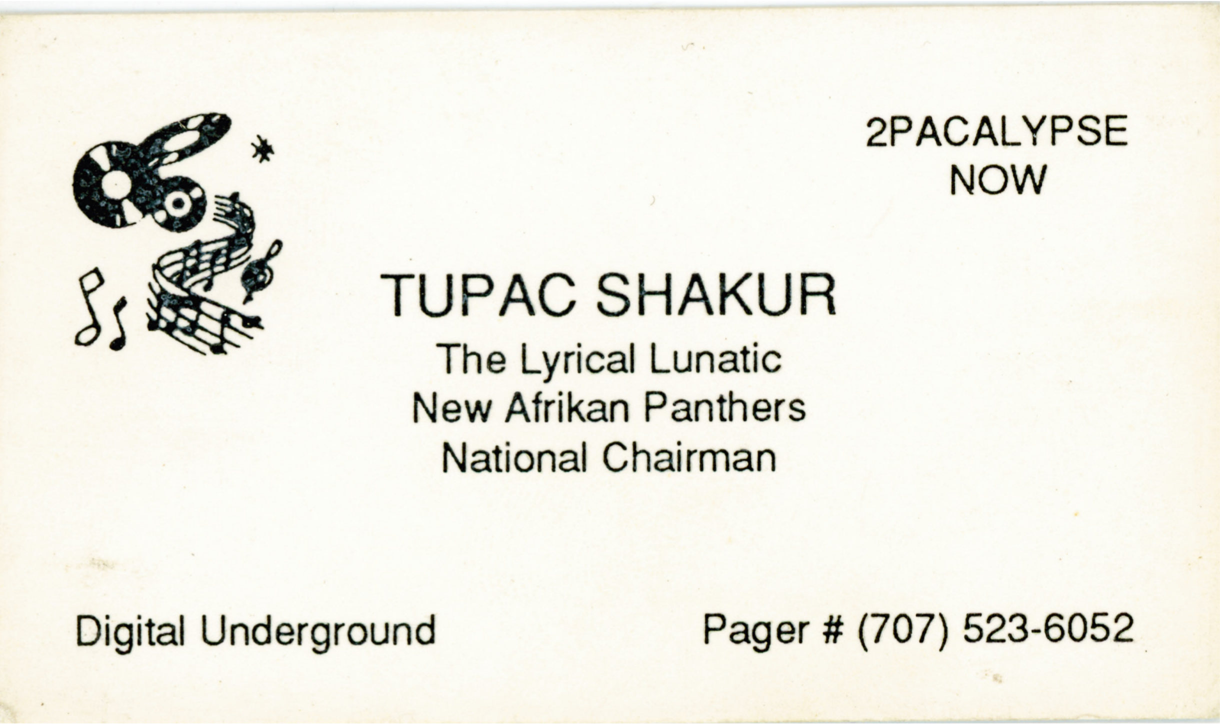
⑩

THE BENEFITS OF Poverty

wide ruled
60 sheets • (120 pages)
9¾ x 7½ in/24.7 x 19.0 cm

all lyrics BY
2PAC
Tupac

09416 © The Mead Corporation, Dayton, Ohio 45463

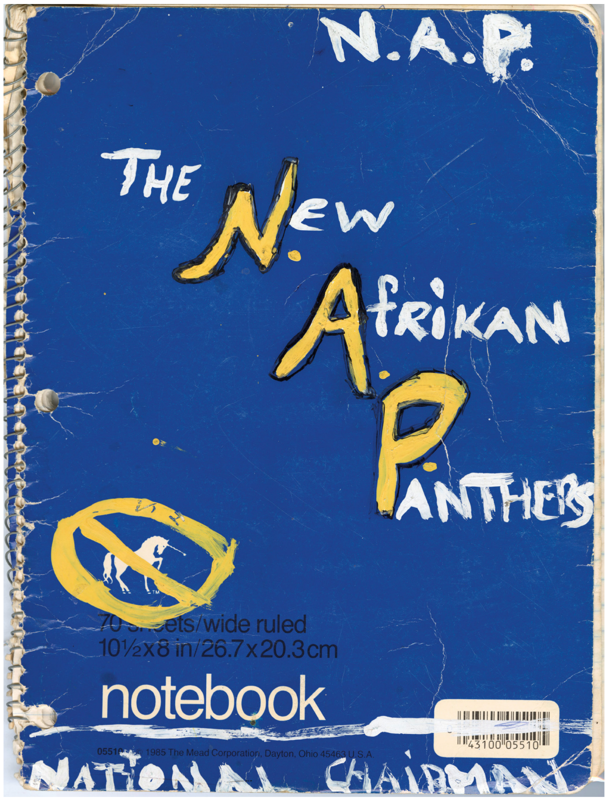


2PACALYPSE
NOW

TUPAC SHAKUR
The Lyrical Lunatic
New Afrikan Panthers
National Chairman

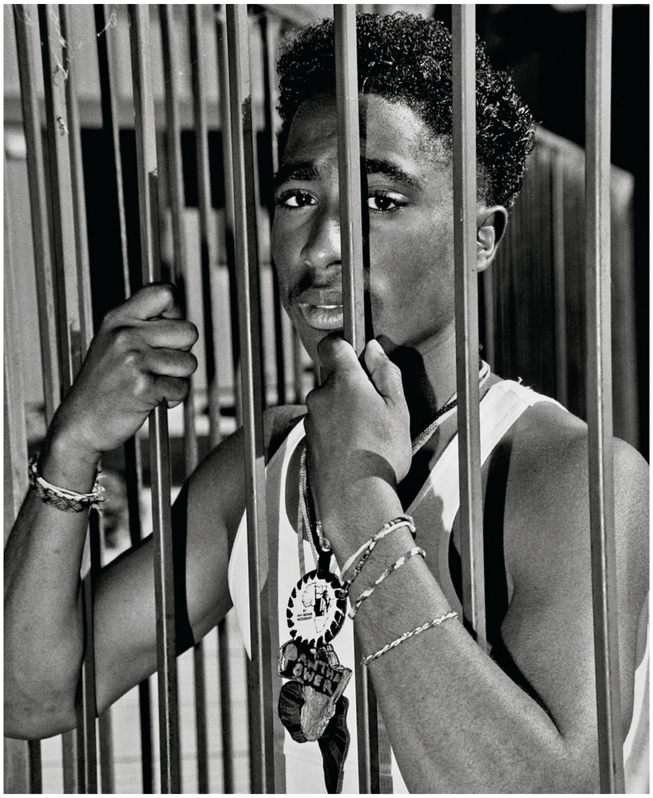
Digital Underground

Pager # (707) 523-6052

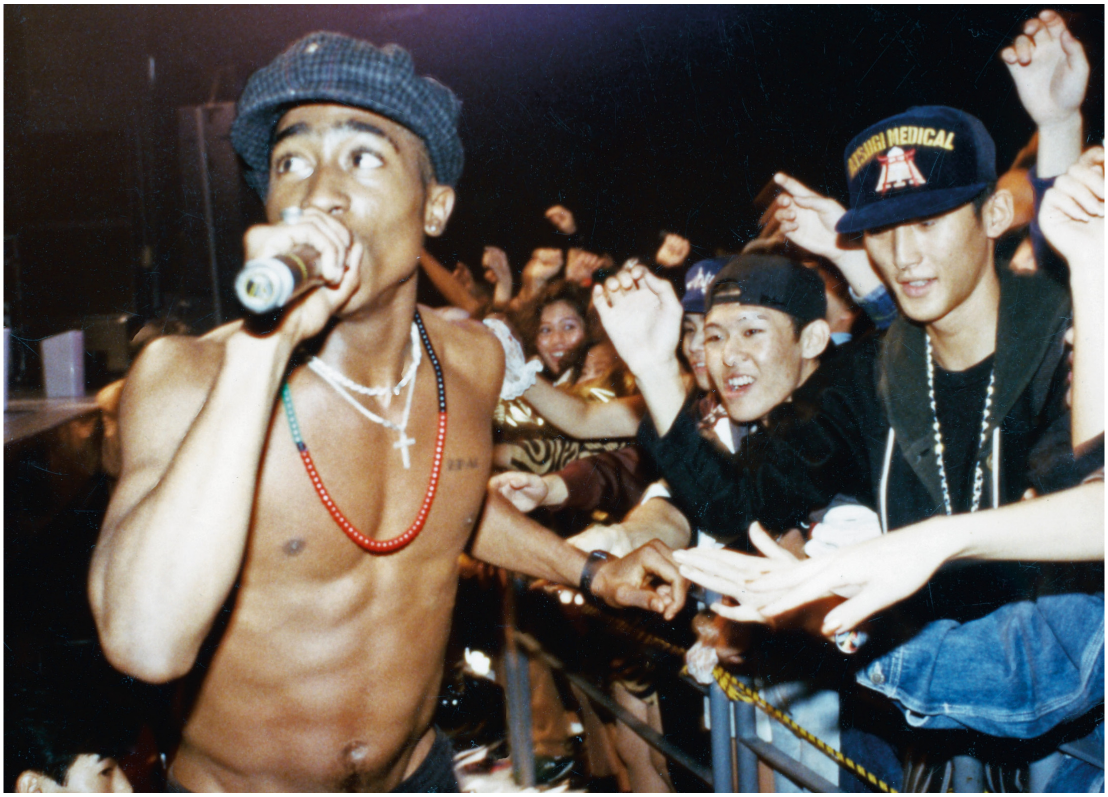

N.A.P.
THE New Afrikan Panthers
70 sheets/wide ruled
10½x8 in/26.7x20.3cm
notebook
43100 05510
National Chairman

Always writing

With Flavor Flav, 1989

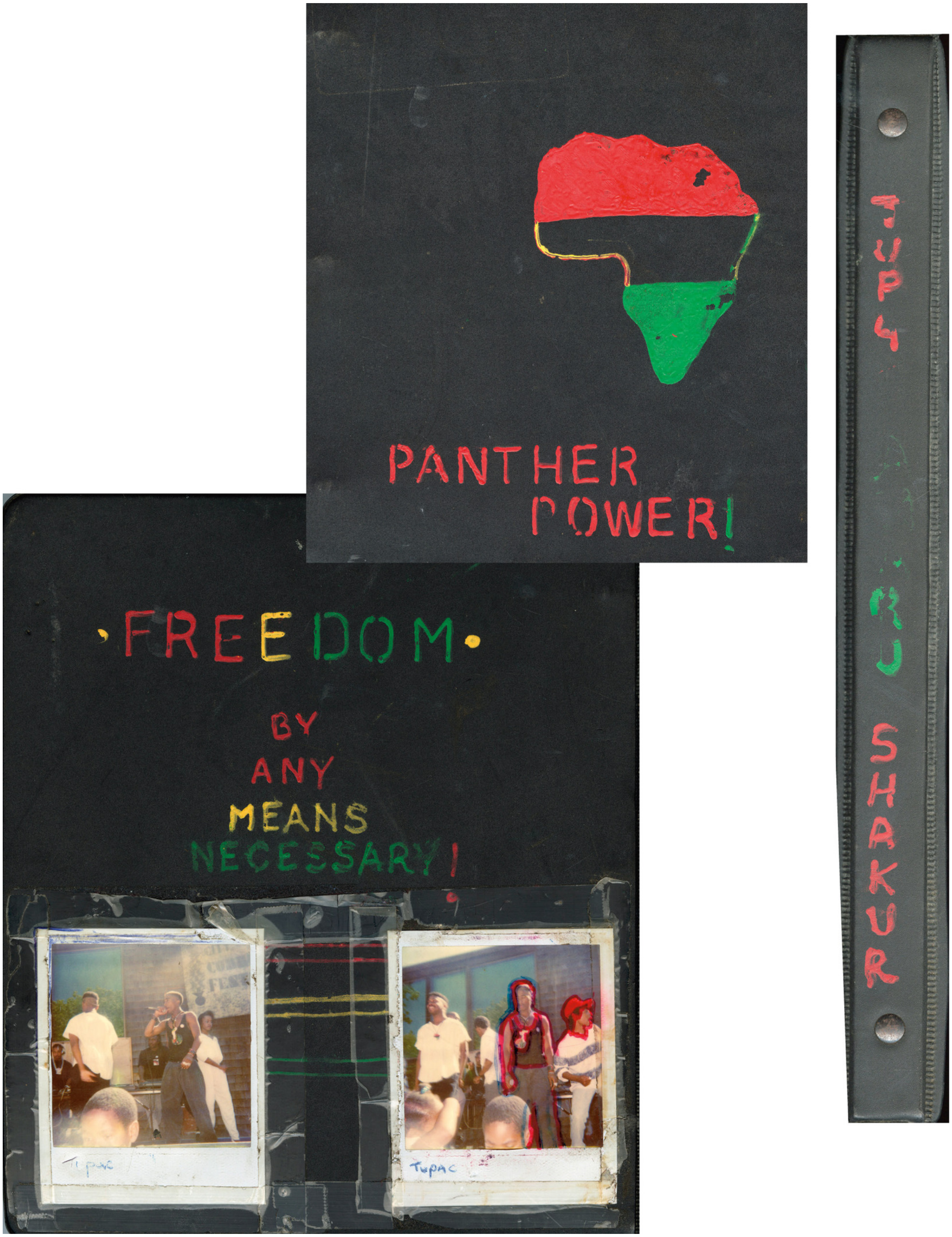


One of Tupac's first professional photo shoots, 1989

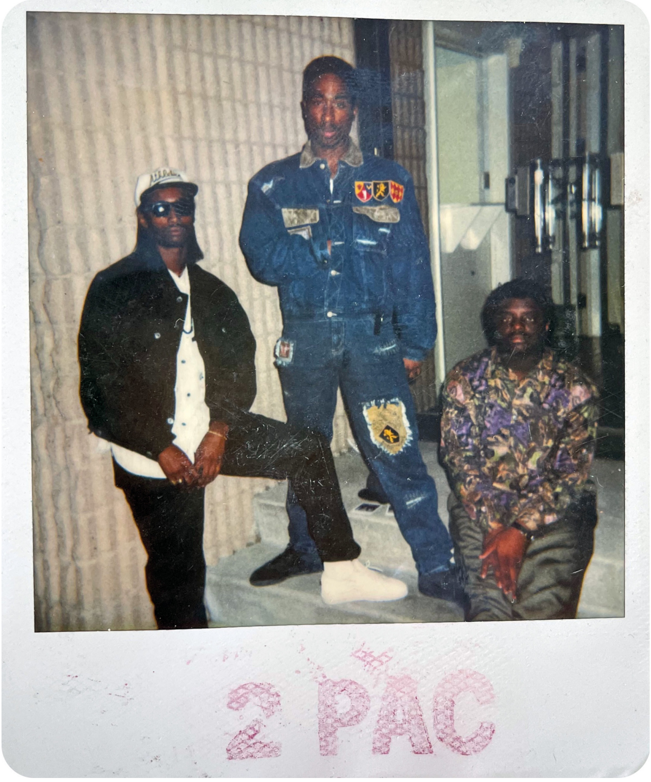

ATSUGI MEDICAL

On tour with Digital, Japan, 1990

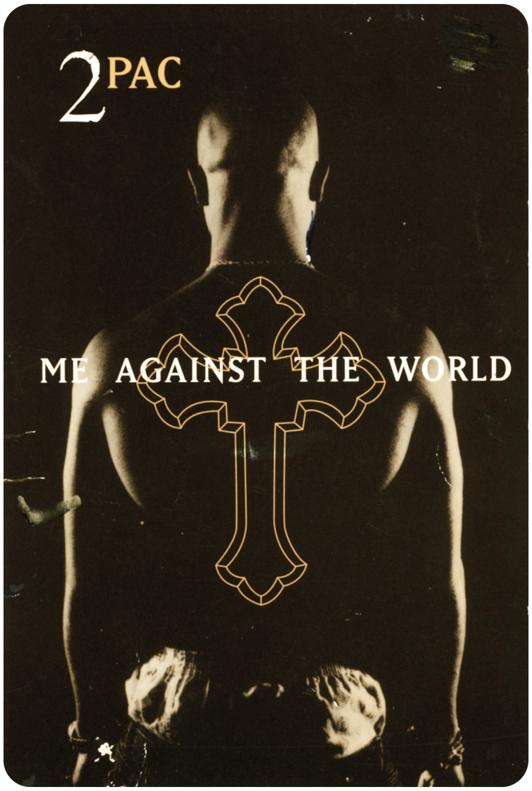
Enjoying time between shows with Shock G, circa 1990


PANTHER
POWER!
·FREEDOM·
BY
ANY
MEANS
NECESSARY!
Tupac
Tupac
TUPAC
SHAKUR

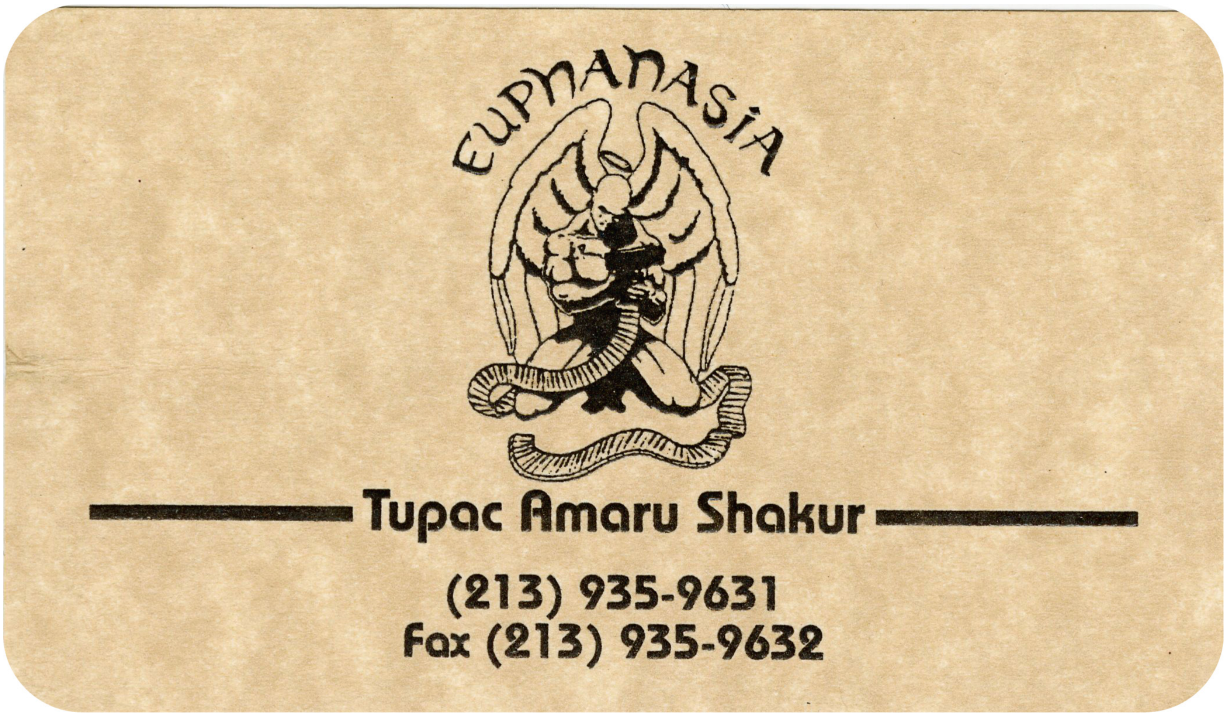
In the studio, circa 1989



With Mike Cooley and Man-Man


2PAC
ME AGAINST THE WORLD

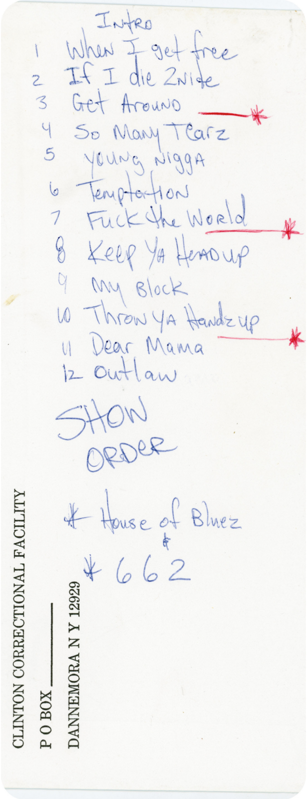
Jeffrey Newbury photo shoot



EUPHANASIA

Tupac Amaru Shakur

(213) 935-9631
Fax (213) 935-9632



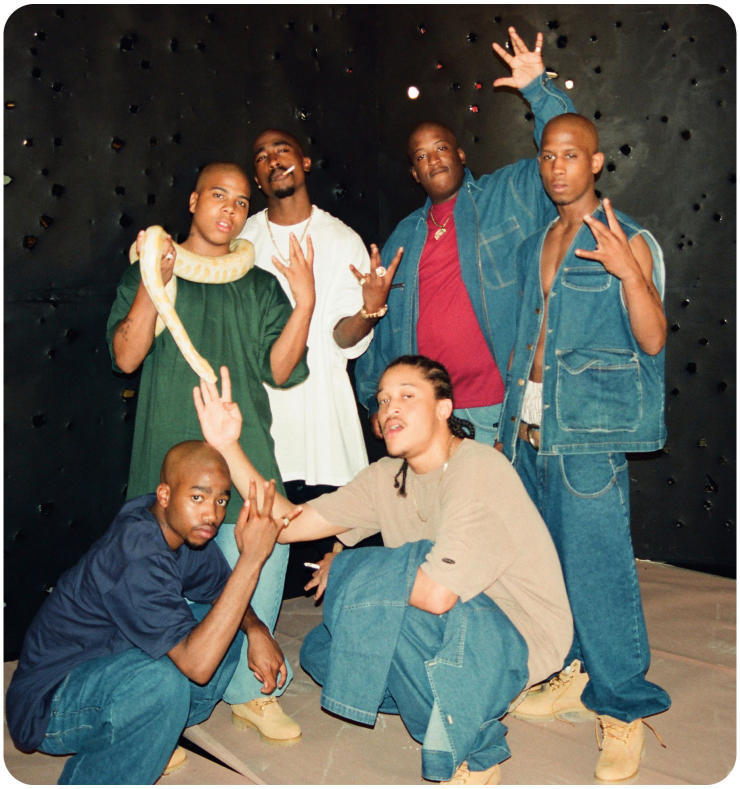
Intro
1 When I get free
2 If I die 2nite
3 Get Around *
4 So Many Tearz
5 Young Nigga
6 Temptation
7 Fuck the World *
8 Keep Ya Head up
9 My Block
10 Throw Ya Handz up
11 Dear Mama *
12 Outlaw

SHOW
ORDER

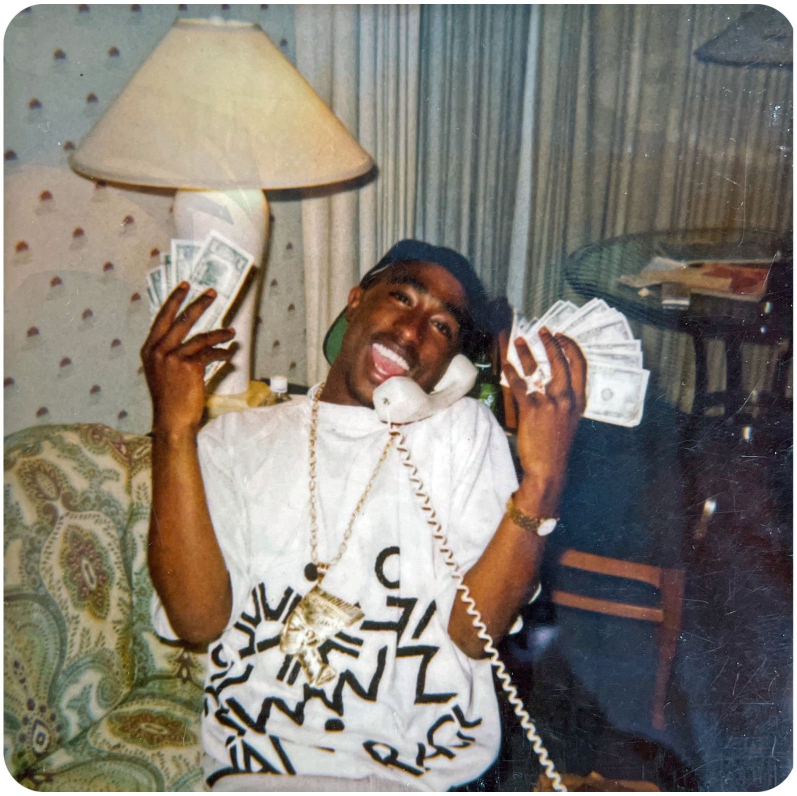
*House of Bluez
&
*662

CLINTON CORRECTIONAL FACILITY
P O BOX ______
DANNEMORA N Y 12929

Set list, 1995



Tupac and the Outlawz, music video, 1996



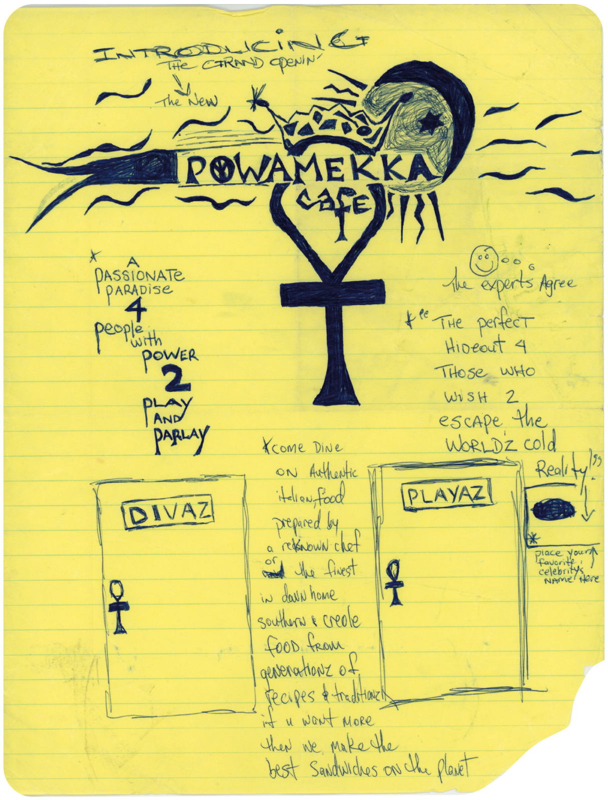
Makin' deals, 1990

THE PENINSULA
BEVERLY HILLS

I Ride 4

Mutulu Sh.

9882 Little Santa Monica Boulevard, Beverly Hills, California 90212, U.S.A.
Tel: (310) 551 2888 Fax: (310) 788 2319



INTRODUCING
The GRAND openin'
The New

POWAMEKKA
Cafe

* A
PASSIONATE
PARADISE
4
people
with
POWER
2
PLAY
AND
PARLAY

The experts Agree

*" THE perfect
Hideout 4
THOSE WHO
WISH 2
escape the
WORLDz cold
Reality!"

*come Dine
on Authentic
italian, food
prepared by
a reknown chef
or ~~and~~ the finest
in down home
southern & creole
food from
generationz of
recipes & traditionz
if u want more
then we make the
best Sandwiches on the planet

DIVAZ

PLAYAZ

*
place your
favorite
celebrity's
NAME Here

Powamekka Café plans

ALL
BOUT
YOU

Having fun in between takes

"Brenda's Got a Baby" music video

0018504

BON BON PICTURES CORP., 9200 SUNSET BLVD., LOS ANGELES, CA 90069

EMPLOYEE NAME	SOCIAL SECURITY NO.	PAY PERIOD	DATE PAID
SHAKUR, TUPAC		04/05/91	04/12/91

PRODUCTION 2075 : JUICE : 704 : 1
406-01 : PRINCIPALS

COMPUTATION OF GROSS

DESCRIPTION	HOURS	EARNINGS
Regular Pay	44.0	1498.00
2.0x OT Pay	6.0	408.40
Nite Prem	10.0	45.96
MEAL PENALT	0.0	110.00
Agent Fee	0.0	195.24
TOTAL GROSS		2257.60
REIMBURSED EXPENSES		0.00
TOTAL TAXES & DEDUCTIONS		974.17
NET PAY		1283.43

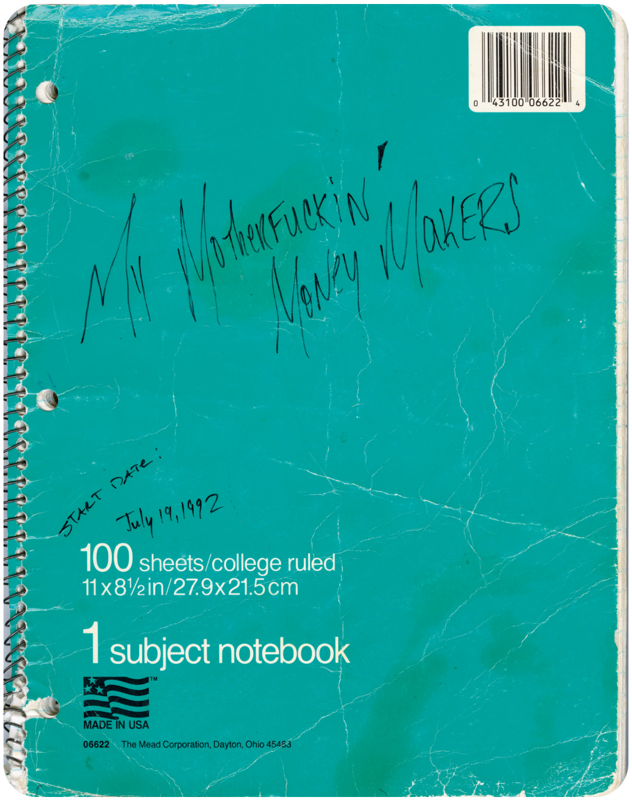
DEDUCTIONS AND TAXES

FICA	172.71
FWT	600.00
STATE INCOME	178.88
CITY INCOME	0.00
SUI/DIS	22.58
UNION	0.00
MISC.	0.00
TOTAL	974.17

YEAR TO DATE TOTALS

GROSS EARNINGS	9533.00
REIMBURSED EXPENSES	0.00
F.I.C.A.	729.26
FED. INCOME TAX	2462.77
STATE INCOME TAX	732.67
CITY INCOME TAX	0.00
STATE DISABILITY	94.35

CONTACT
BON BON PICTURES CORP. FOR
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE CLAIMS



My Motherfuckin' Money Makers

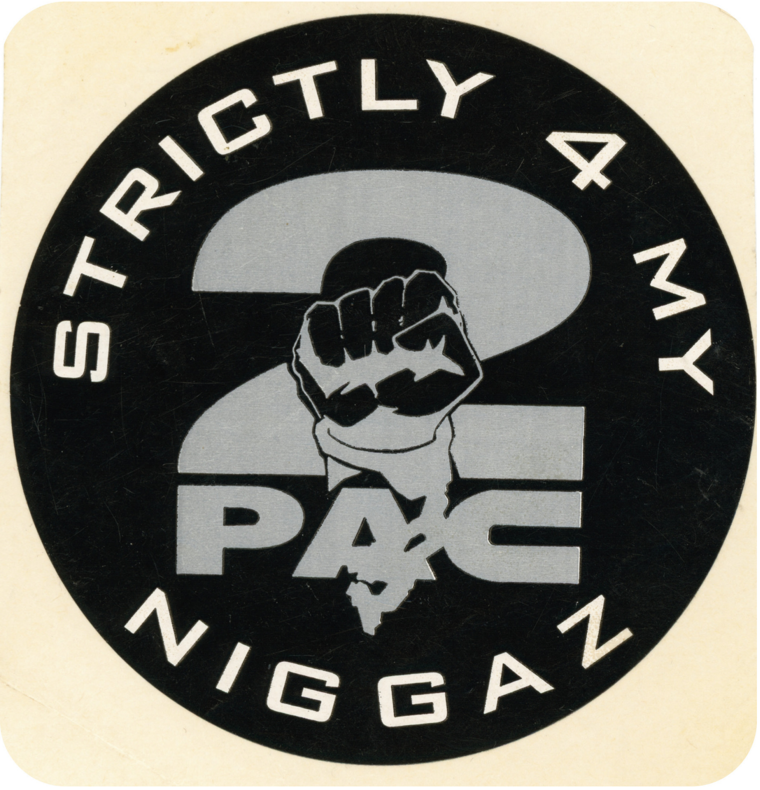
Start Date: July 19, 1992

100 sheets/college ruled
11 x 8½ in/27.9 x 21.5 cm

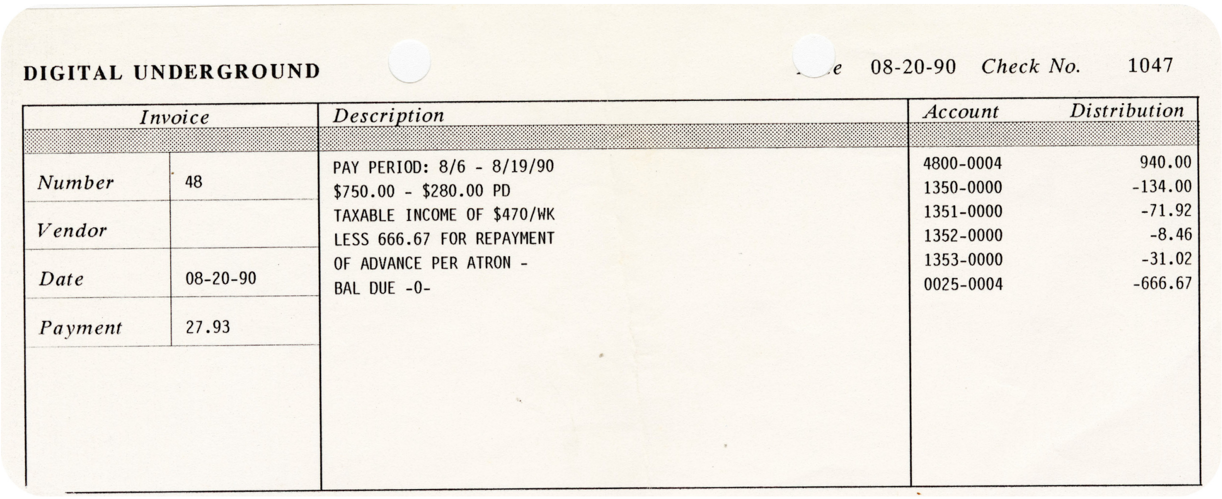
1 subject notebook

MADE IN USA

06622 The Mead Corporation, Dayton, Ohio 45463


STRICTLY 4 MY
NIGGAZ
2
PAC

Tupac and Biggie, New York, 1994



DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

e 08-20-90 *Check No.* 1047

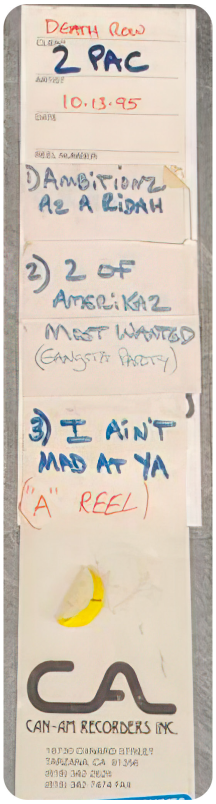
Invoice	
Number	48
Vendor	
Date	08-20-90
Payment	27.93

Description

PAY PERIOD: 8/6 - 8/19/90
$750.00 - $280.00 PD
TAXABLE INCOME OF $470/WK
LESS 666.67 FOR REPAYMENT
OF ADVANCE PER ATRON -
BAL DUE -0-

Account	*Distribution*
4800-0004	940.00
1350-0000	-134.00
1351-0000	-71.92
1352-0000	-8.46
1353-0000	-31.02
0025-0004	-666.67

Paying dues with Digital Underground



DEATH ROW
CLIENT
2 PAC
ARTIST
10.13.95
DATE

REEL NUMBER

1) AMBITIONZ AZ A RIDAH

2) 2 OF AMERIKAZ MOST WANTED (GANGSTA PARTY)

3) I AIN'T MAD AT YA

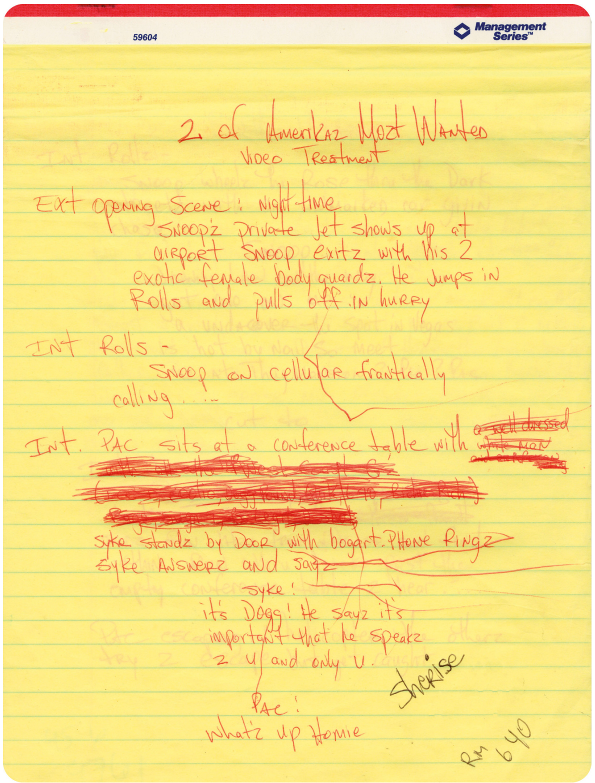
("A" REEL)

CAN-AM RECORDERS INC.

18730 OXNARD STREET
TARZANA, CA 91356
(818) 342 2626
(818) 342 7474 FAX

With his castmates from Juice, 1991

“2 of Americaz Most Wanted” video shoot



59604

Management Series™

2 of Amerikaz Mozt Wanted
Video Treatment

Ext opening Scene: night time
Snoop'z private Jet shows up at
airport Snoop exitz with his 2
exotic female body guardz. He jumps in
Rolls and pulls off in hurry

Int Rolls -
Snoop on cellular frantically
calling . . . .

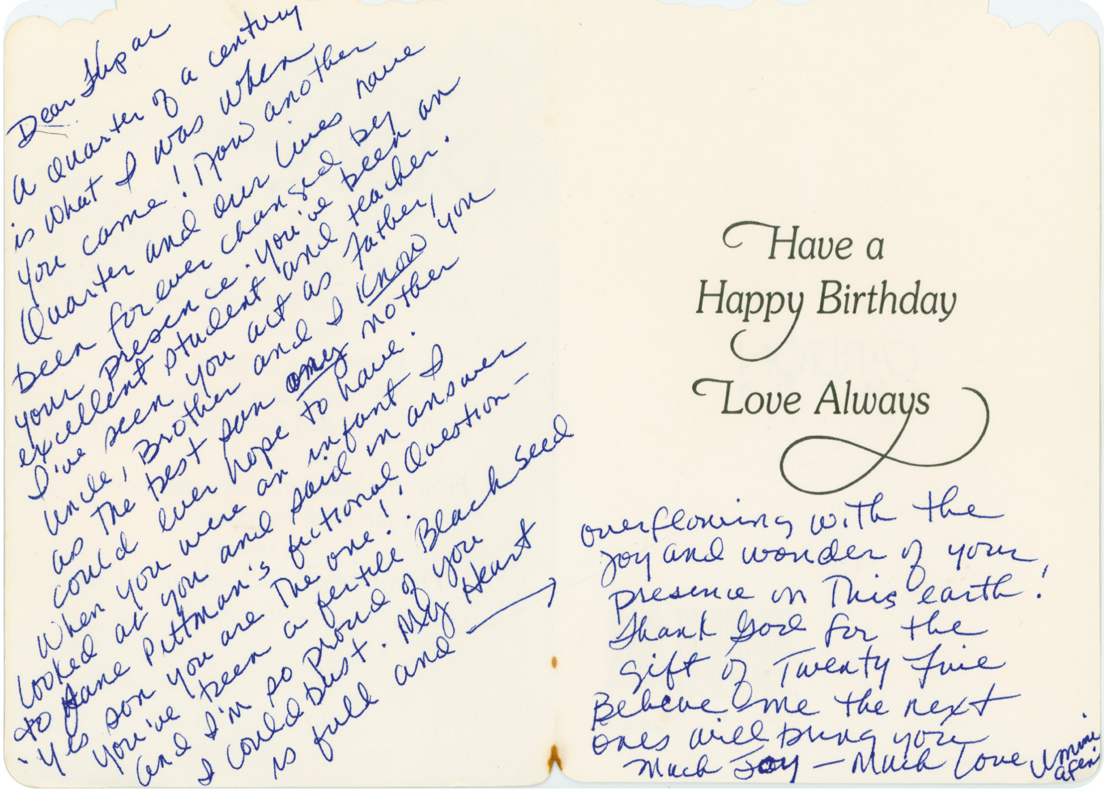
Int. Pac sits at a conference table with ~~a well dressed white man~~ ~~[illegible]~~
~~[illegible]~~
~~[illegible]~~
~~[illegible]~~
Syke standz by Door with bogart. Phone Ringz
Syke Answerz and sayz
Syke:
it's Dogg! He sayz it's
important that he speakz
2 U and only U.

Sherise

Pac:
whatz up Homie

Rm 640

"2 of Americaz Most Wanted" video treatment



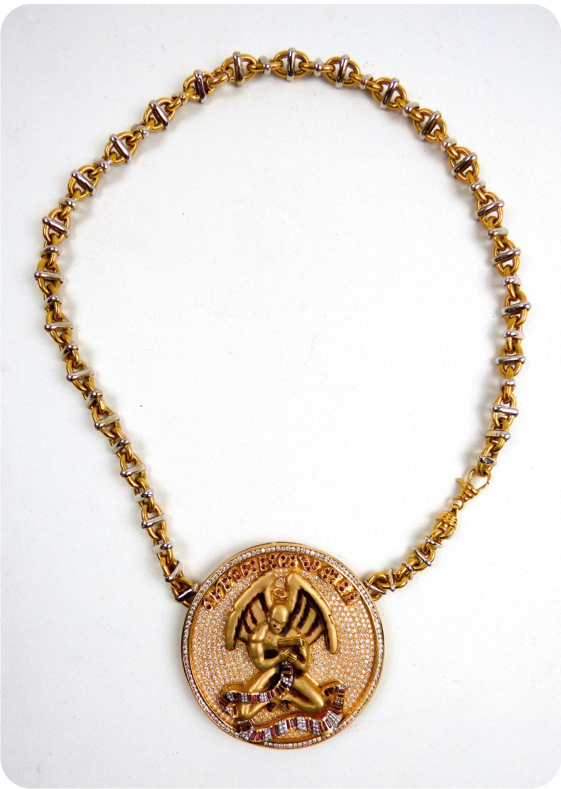
Dear Tupac
A Quarter of a century
is what I was when
You came! Now another
Quarter and our lives have
been forever changed by
your presence. You've been an
excellent student and teacher.
I've seen you act as father,
uncle, Brother and I know you
as The best son any mother
could ever hope to have.
When you were an infant I
looked at you and said in answer
to Jane Pittman's fictional Question —
"Yes son you are The one!".
You've been a fertile Black Seed
and I'm so proud of you
I could bust. My Heart
is full and →

Have a
Happy Birthday
Love Always

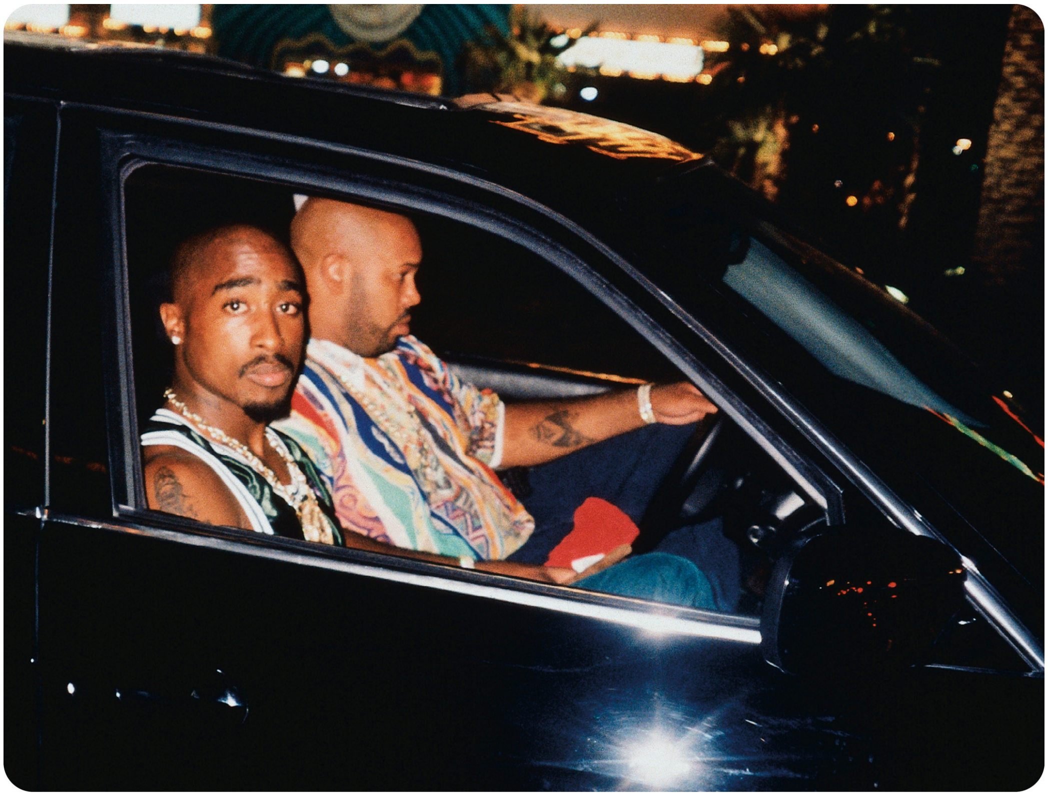
overflowing with the
joy and wonder of your
presence on This earth!
Thank God for the
gift of Twenty Five
Believe me the next
ones will bring you
Much Joy — Much Love Mommi
Afeni

Birthday card from Afeni, 1996

With Kidada Jones, 1996



Tupac designed his Euphanasia chain and medallion as a tribute to Slick Rick.



Last picture of Tupac

For Glo

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, Tupac Amaru Shakur…for filling your art with messages of hope and change…and for courageously attacking injustice with your raw and radical honesty. In 1988, when I met you, you were only seventeen, but you were already on your path. You were determined to find a platform so you could stage a movement with a mission to make Black people know that their lives mattered. It didn't take long before you found your way. From the sidelines your friends watched your career take flight. We watched you try to right wrongs. We watched you speak loudly against police brutality. We watched your spirit never wane. We watched you fly. **Thank you,** Tupac—your life stands as an example of what it means to be compassionate and caring, and what it means to put yourself *second.* Your friends, family, and fans miss you dearly.

Love, gratitude, and respect to Afeni Shakur. Your passion for our people was always an inspiration to me, and your intellect and courage were something to be admired. Thank you for instilling in your son all that made him who he became. And **thank you** for believing that I could help in the complicated journey of telling his life story.

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The Shakur & Cox families make all of the projects done in their absence possible.

Staci Robinson, thank you for completing the job Afeni hired you to do so many years ago.

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Photo Insert

4 Afeni and baby Tupac, 1971. (Courtesy of Barbara Caress)

5 Tupac, one year old, 1972. (Courtesy of Jamal Joseph)

6 Panther minister of information Elbert "Big Man" Howard confers with Panther Afeni Shakur and minister of education Ray "Masai" Hewitt prior to press conference in Philadelphia. (Getty Images)

7 Poetry Afeni wrote while incarcerated, published in *The Black Panther,* April 6, 1970

8 After their arrest, Lumumba and Afeni are escorted from Elizabeth Street police station, New York City, April 3, 1969. (Associated Press)

9 At age twelve, Tupac made his first onstage appearance at the iconic Apollo Theater as Travis in the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble's production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun.*

10 Afeni in New York, circa 1970. (Courtesy of Longview Publishing Inc./Daily Worker Collection)

11 Mutulu, Sekyiwa, Tupac, and cousins, New York City, circa 1976

12 Tupac's poem "Finally," about a high school crush, circa 1988. (Courtesy of Cosima Knez)

13 Tupac at Kwanzaa party with family and friends, New York City

14 Lumumba Shakur holding Tupac, New York City, 1973

15 Tupac sitting on Mutulu's lap, New York City, circa 1975

16 Tupac, Sekyiwa, and Afeni visiting Tupac's godfather Geronimo Pratt at San Quentin State Prison with his family, circa 1980.

17 Kenneth "Legs" Saunders

18 Tupac and family friends, 1986

19 Tupac with his friend and schoolmate Jada Pinkett in Baltimore, circa 1987. (Courtesy of John Cole)

20 Tupac with schoolmates at Baltimore School for the Arts, circa 1987. (Courtesy of Yearbook Library)

21 One of Tupac's many journals, titled *The Benefits of Poverty*

22 Tupac's business card, circa 1989

23 Tupac's *The New Afrikan Panthers* notebook, circa 1989.

24 Tupac and Flavor Flav, January 30, 1989, at the American Music Awards. (Clarence Gatson/Gado/Getty Images)

25 Tupac posing at one of his first professional photo shoots, circa 1989. (Courtesy of Kathy Crawford)

26 Tupac in Japan on tour with Digital Underground, performing in front of a crowd, 1990. (Courtesy of Atron Gregory)

27 Tupac and Shock G, circa 1990. (Courtesy of Atron Gregory)

28 Tupac's "Panther Power" binder with Polaroid pictures of him performing with friends in Marin City.

29 In the studio at the sound board, Tupac works on first album, circa 1989. (Courtesy of Michael Cooley)

30 Tupac with close friends Mike Cooley and Man-Man, circa 1989. (Courtesy of Michael Cooley)

31 Promotional postcard for Tupac's album *Me Against the World.*

32 *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* photo shoot, 1991. (Photograph by Jeffery Newbury © Amaru Entertainment Inc.)

33 Tupac's Euphanasia business card, 1996.

34 On a Clinton Correctional Facility envelope, Tupac wrote this set list for one of his upcoming live shows

35 Tupac and the Outlawz (Napolean, E.D.I. Mean, Fatal, Kastro, and Kadafi) at "Hit 'Em Up" video shoot, 1996.

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43 Promotional sticker of Tupac's logo for his sophomore album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*

44 Tupac and Biggie, Royalton Hotel, New York City, 1994. (Photo 12/Alamy Stock Photo)

45 One of Tupac's first pay stubs from his time with Digital Underground, August 20, 1990

46 October 13, 1995, immediately after his release from Clinton Correctional Facility, Tupac was already recording at Can-Am Studios

47 Khalil Kain, Omar Epps, Tupac Shakur, and Jermaine Hopkins in a scene from the film *Juice,* 1991. (Getty Images)

48 Behind the scenes, Tupac and Snoop at the "2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted" video shoot

49 Tupac's handwritten video treatment concept for "2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted," 1996.

50 Tupac's final birthday card, for his twenty-fifth birthday, from his mother

51 Tupac and Kidada Jones, Italy, 1996. (Courtesy of Karla Radford)

52 Tupac designed his Euphanasia chain and medallion as a tribute to Slick Rick

53 September 7, 1996. Last Picture of Tupac. (Courtesy of Leonard Jefferson)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STACI ROBINSON is an author and screenwriter. Her previous projects and collaborations include *Tupac Remembered: Bearing Witness to a Life and Legacy,* the novel *Interceptions,* the film *The Bounce Back,* and the FX documentary *Dear Mama: The Saga of Afeni and Tupac Shakur.*

Robinson graduated from UCLA with a degree in history. She currently lives with her family in Northern California.

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~~Black Seed Keep on Growing~~

The Rose That Grew from Concrete
An Autobiography By Tupac A. Shakur

Introduction
- I The Panther and the Gangster
- II The "Shining Prince" is Born Free

Childhood
- III Lessons from American Schools
- IV Lessons from Lady Liberty
- V Lessons from American Society

Baltimore
- VI A Better Place
- VII The Baltimore School 4 the Arts
- VIII The Eternal Circle

Marin / Rosa
- VIIII Migration 2 the Reservation
- X The Boyz from Rosa
- XI April/ Girls
- XII Humpty Hump Across America
- XIII On My Own

Black Seed-Grown Up
Black Seed to Black Oak

BACK TO IMAGE

Introduction

Calling This an autobiography may have mislead [*sic*] some people. It's more of a Diary that I don't mind people reading. There are personal things in these pages and it is my hope that by gaining some insight on my life one may have a better understanding of why I am and why I Do some of the things I Do. If By Telling my life story, I Hurt someone or I uncover some stones, forgive me, my only intention was to express myself, 2 in fact Better myself By telling all about myself! At This moment I am 18 years old and the Date is November 26, 1989, In the middle of my life. Anyway, Here it is my Diary, poems and autobiography wrapped in one.

Peace,
Tupac Amaru Shakur

BACK TO IMAGE

When I was arrested it took a while before I fully realized The situation/trouble I was in. At first I thought there was a misunderstanding and soon it would be sorted out and I would be charged with something not so serious and I'd take my medicine and move along. I did not know what a conspiracy was but I knew I didn't

BACK TO IMAGE

Haiku

Haiku is a Japanese form to write poetry
The form is 5 syllables 7 syllables
and again 5 syllables mostly
about life and nature

Free!
Sekou
Chui
Bilahl
Jamal
now!

Faith

Faith is what we need
It keeps us alive day by day
Faith is important

Black

Black is our color
We were born black
in Africa
I am black and proud

A dream is lovely
You drift to another
Land
I dream in the night.

This is dedicated to my family
who are imprisoned for
trying to build a better nation
for me.
STAY STRONG

Chui
Sekou
Jamal
Bilahl

My test results in school
were
Reading Post High School
Math 7.7
Language 11.3
By the way I’m in the sixth grade
I’ll be twelve in June 16, 1983
I love you all!

BACK TO IMAGE

Tupac

Please find meaning in the greatness of cleaning and responsibility etc.
This room is a pig sty.
I will not accept it.—AF

BACK TO IMAGE

Library Rap by Tupac A. Shakur
Performed by: The East Side Crew—Dana Smith, Kevin Mcleary, Tupac Shakur

On Behalf of us and the finalists
Yo’ Enoch Pratt Bust this!
Enoch Pratt it’s your birthday so Why don’t
you listen to what I Say
because reading and writing are important to me that’s why I visit the Pratt Library
Hey citizens of Baltimore The Enoch Pratt Library is an open door to life and pleasures of all kind for people of our world to develop our minds
So heed my advice cause it’s not hard
To get yourself a library card
So all you athletes study and read
Cause more smart people is what this world needs
So now that you know what I’m talking about
Listen to the word as we spell it out
The “R” is for ready to learn and ready to learn and read
The “E” is for earnest, what you got to be
“A” is for author who writes the books
“D”e-termination is what always took
A library is a key to success
So come on down and join the rest
Cause your [*sic*] never too young and your [*sic*] never too old
Behind every library is a pot of gold
Okay your new in town and you step inside
You see all those books gonna blow your mind
So you ask the librarian “can you help me?”
She says is this your first time in Pratt library
If you can’t read then your [*sic*] in trouble
Going to the store they’ll charge you double
So stay in school and learn to read

Earn all the credits that you need
so you

BACK TO IMAGE

Jada

4 Jada

U R the omega of my heart
The foundation 4 my conception of love
When I think of what a Black woman should be
It’s u that I first think of

U will never fully understand
How deeply my heart feels 4 U
I worry that we’ll grow apart
And I’ll end up losing u

U bring me 2 climax without sex
And u do it all with regal grace
U R my heart in Human Form
a friend I could never replace

BACK TO IMAGE

Nothing Can Come Between Us
4 John

let’s not talk of money
let us forget the world
4 a moment let’s just revel
in our eternal comradery
in my heart I know
There will never be a day
That I don’t remember
The times we shared
u were a friend
When I was at my lowest
And being a friend 2 me
Was not easy nor fashionable
Regardless of how popular
I become u remain
My unconditional friend
Unconditional in it’s [*sic*] truest sense
Did u think I would forget
Did u 4 one moment dream
that I would ignore u
If so remember this from here 2 forever
Nothing can come between us

BACK TO IMAGE

Words of Wisdom
All lyrics written by Tupac Amaru Shakur
Concept by Tupac A. Shakur

This is 4 the masses lower classes ones u left out
Jobs were given better living but we were kept out
Made 2 feel inferior but we're superior
Break the chains on our brains that made us fear ya
Pledge allegiance 2 the flag neglects us
& honor a man that refused 2 respect us
Emancipation Proclamation—Please!
Lincoln just said that 2 save the nation-These
R lies that we've all accepted
Say no 2 drugs but the governments kept it
Running thru our community killing the unity
The War on Drugs is a war on u & me
And yet they say this is the home of the free
U ask me it's all about hypocricy [*sic*]
"The constitution"—yo' it don't apply 2 me
"Lady Liberty"—stupid tramp lied 2 me
This may be strong and no ones gonna like what I'm pumpin
So get up it's time 2 start nation building
Fed up cuz we gotta start teaching children
That they can be what they want 2 be
It's more 2 life than just poverty
Words of wisdom

BACK TO IMAGE

Trapped the video

Start
B4 the music starts we hear noise coming from an office door labeled "The Underground Railroad" The door opens we c a long table filled with young white executives and at the head of the table sits 2Pac.
The executives R giving video ideas 4 Trapped 2 ideas R heard a Hammer concept and a NWA concept. I turn 2 a small table of kids dressed like Real young black teenagers (beepers, baseball caps) 2 get the Okay each time I get thumbs down. I get up & walk out as I step out 2 the street music starts!

BACK TO IMAGE

2Pacalypse Now
Written by Tupac Amaru Shakur
Starring the lyrical lunatic 2Pacalypse
Also featuring: Mocedes, Ray Love, Treach, Apache, Lakim, Money B, Shock G, Schmoove Schmoov

Side Alone

1 Words of Wisdom J-X
2 Never Surrenda' S
3 Walking Trapped! S
4 Uplift Tha' Race X
5 The Case of the Misplaced Mic
6 What I Would Not Do I Gotta Thing 4 U S
7 Straight From the Underground S

Side 2

8 ~~My Burning Heart Phrases of Prophecy~~ My Burning Heart
9 Rolling out 2 Forsythe County
10 BACKSTABBAS N
11 Thought U Knew N
12 They Claim That I'm Violent N
12½ Reap the 2Pacalypse S
13 2Pacalypse Now S

Movie Samples
Black Belt Jones
The Mack
Batman
Across 110th Street
48 Hours

Rock III

Production
Raw Fusion
Shock G Jinx
Ramone The New Style Bomb Squad
A.D. Dion
Terminator X

Dedicated 2 the Memory of
Troy “Trouble T-Roy” Dixon
Yusef Hawkins
Kenneth Saunders
Snoop
Damon
Big John
Malcom X
Huey Newton

BACK TO IMAGE

2Pac "Troublesome 21"

East Side Intro

1. Holler if Ya Hear Me w/ the Live Squad (2Pac & the Live Squad)
2. Crooked Nigga Too (2Pac & Big D)
3. I Get Around w/ Digital Underground (Digital Underground)
4. Love Ya Future (Digital Underground)
5. Troublesome (2Pac and Jay Zee)
6. Strictly 4 My Niggaz (Law House & 2 Pac)
7. The Streetz R Deathrow (The Live Squad & 2Pac)

West Side Intro

8. Don't Call Me Bytch (Lawhouse & 2Pac)
9. Still Don't Give a Phuck (DJ Daryl & 2Pac)
10. Keep Ya Head Up (DJ Daryl & 2Pac)
11. Papaz Theme (2Pac & Big D)
12. When I Get Free <Souljah's Revenge> (Lawhouse & 2Pac)
13. Nothing But Love (DJ Daryl & 2Pac)
14. I Wonda if Heaven Got a Ghetto (2Pac & Lawhouse)

Outro

This album is dedicated 2:

1. The Spiritz of Latasha Harlins, Yusef Hawkins, and the murdered children of Atlanta and 2 all lost souls on this planet…. I feel ya!
2. My mother congratz 1 yr Drug free I'm extremely proud of u. U R as U have always been my hero. 2 my sista my model for true Black Women. Strong but sensitive and understated. I love U both
3. 2 My family I love u all
4. 2 My True Niggaz Peace 2 ya, Lay ya troubles down, much love 2 The 50 Niggaz Posse

BACK TO IMAGE this page

N.I.G.G.A.
Never
Ignorant
Getting
Goals
Accomplished

BACK TO IMAGE

Here we Go turn it up let it start
From block 2 block we snatching hearts & Jacking Marks
& the punk police can’t fade me & maybe
We can have peace some day G
But right now I got my mind set up
Looking down the barrel of my 9 get up
Cuz it’s time 2 make the payback fat
2 my Niggaz on the block better stay strapped black
Accept no substitutes I bring truth 2 the youth
Tear the roof off the whole scoop
Oh no I won’t turn the other cheek
In case u can’t c that’s why we burn the other week
Now we got ’em in a smash blast
How long will it last til the po’ get mo’ cash
Until then raise up to my young Blk males
Blaze up
Life’s a mess don’t stress test R given
But be thankful that ya living bless
Must love 2 my Niggaz in the pen
C ya when I free ya if not when they
Shove me in
Once again it’s an all out scrap
Keep ya hands on ya gat have ya boyz
Watch ya back
Cuz in the alleys out in Cali, I’ma tell ya
Mess with the best & A vest couldn’t help ya
Scream if ya feel me c it clearly
Ya too near me Holler if ya hear me

BACK TO IMAGE

2 Pac
“Me Against the World”

Side A

Introduction

1 If I Die 2nite

*2 Me Against the World (Used in Bad Boys soundtrack)

*3 So Many Tearz single (Show Song)

*4 Temptation club Single

5 YoungNigga (Show Song)

6 Heavy in the Game w/ Richie Rich

7 Lord Knowz

Side B

*1 Dear Mama 1st Single (Show Song)

2 It Ain’t Crazy

*3 Can u get Away 2nd Single (Show Song)

4 Old School B-side

5 Phuck the World (Show Song)

6 Death Around the Corna’

7 OUTLAW featuring DRAMACYDAL (Show Song)

1. Phuck the World
2. So Many Tears
3. Young Nigga
4. Can u get Away
5. Dear Mama
6. Keep Ya head Outlaw
7. Keep ya Head up

BACK TO IMAGE this page

Starry Night

Dedicated in memory of Vincent Van Gogh

A creative heart, obsessed with satisfying
This dormant and uncaring society
U have given them the stars at night
And u have given then Bountiful Bouquets of Sunflowers
But 4 u there is only contempt
And though u pour yourself into that frame
And present it so proudly
This world could not accept your Masterpieces
from the heart

So on that Starry Night
U gave 2 us and
U took away from us
The one thing we never acknowledged
Your life

BACK TO IMAGE

Nothing Gold

Nature’s first green is gold
Her hardest hue to hold
Her early leaf’s a flower
But only so an hour
Then leaf subsides to leaf
So Eden sank to grief
Dawn goes down to day
Nothing Gold can Stay

By Robert Frost

BACK TO IMAGE

2Pac Album V
“Supreme Euthanasia”
Dated Sept 13, 1995
Proposed Release date 5-1-96

A

1. Introduction “The Secretz of War” (Producer Johnnie Jay)
2. Don’t Make Enemiez (Producer Rhythm D)
3. Hold Ya Head (W/ Queen Latifah) (Producer Kay Gee)
4. Too Late (Producer Warren G)
5. Da Struggle Kontinuez (W/ Kam & Smiff & Wesson) (Producer Mr. Walt)
6. Only God Can Judge Me (Producer Sean T)
7. Makin’ Movez (Producer Moe Z)
8. No Witnesses (W/ Method Man & Freddie Foxxx) (Producer The RZA)

B

9. If U Want Me 2 Stay (Producer Shock G)
10. Til I C L.A. (W/ Ice Cube and Coolio) (Producer Battlecat)
11. Scared Man (Producer Mike Mosely)
12. N Da Morning (W/ R-Kelly) (Producer R-Kelly)
13. 5 Levelz of tha Game (W/ Felony, 187, C-Bo & Big Malkie) (Producer 187)
14. N Tha Heartz of Men (featuring: Scarface & Kool G. Rap) (Producer Johnnie Jay)
15. Outro—“The Supreme Euthanasia” (Producer Shock G)

With special guests: Kool G Rap, Queen Latifah, Method Man, Coolio, Ice Cube, Felony, Fatal, Big Malkie, Scarface, R Kelly, Freddie Foxxx, Kam, and Smiff & Wesson

BACK TO IMAGE

2Pac “When I Get Free

Intro

1. All Eyez on Me (w/Syke)
2. Ambitionz As A Ridah
3. Shorty Wanna B A G
4. How Do U Want It
5. I ain’t Mad At Cha’ (Featuring Danny Boy)
6. When I get Free
7. Picture Me Rollin (w/Syke & C. P.O.) Featuring Danny Boy
8. Come with Me (Interlude)
9. Wonda Why they call U…*
10. Secrets of a War*
11. Life Goez On
12. Til I C L.A.

BACK TO IMAGE

2 Live & Die in L.A.

Helicopter viewz without me
*(Perf.) Down Hollywood Blvd (Walk of Fame)
Roscoez (outside)
~~Venice beach~~
~~Westwood~~
West Hollywood* Santa Monica (Perf.) Malibu (Perf.)
~~The Valley~~
East L.A.
*In a Pool outside (Perfo.)

Me hitchhiking in L.A.
All the diff faces & national tie 2
places & landmarkz
Starts with Theo sayin how hot it is in L.A.
Then me standing by a broke down Rolls on freeway
Then I start hitchhiking

Endz

BACK TO IMAGE

Thanks 2 Shock G 4 putting me Down with the Underground
My mother whom I love, my sister, Jean, Tommy, Scott, Billy, Jamala, Kenny, Katari, Mailing, Yassmyn, Yafeu, Mutulu, Assata, Geronimo, The Black Panther Party, NAPO, The New Afrikan Panthers, Atron, Liela, T.M.S. Strictly D.O.P.E, Cotati Caberet, my wife Lisa The Walton Avenue Posse in the Bronx, N.Y., the Jungle Posse in Marin City California, The Boyz from Rosa, the Baltimore School of the Arts, Ernie McClintock, John Cole, Jada Pinkett, Sharon, my family, my True Friends and all of those who Believed in 2PACALYPSE.

A Special Shout out 2 my Posse: Queen Latifah and the Flavor Unit, the New Style, Digital Underground, Paris, CHEBA, Heavy D and all the Boyz, Public Enemy, Monie Love, Si lk Times Leather, 3rd Bass The 45 King MC Lyte & K-Rock, Big Daddy Kane, Scoob, Scrap, Mister C, Kid N Play Yoyo & The Lynch Mob, and all the groups who supported 2PACALYPSE.

Peace 2 Eric B and Rakim, KRS ONE, Tragedy, N.W.A, Ice Cube, Above the Law, Body & Soul, Nefettiti, Afros, 2 Live Crew, Salt & Pepa, L.L. Cool J, Ghetto Boys, D-Nice, K-SOLO, EPMD, Jungle Brothers, Tribe Called Quest, 415, Tone Loc, Ice T, Def Jeff, The Nation of Islam, X-Clan, And all the other Hip Hop groups who really strive 2 Keep Hip Hop alive! Peace thank u 4 paving the way 4 2PACALPYSE

A Special Fuck U 2 the crooked government, sellout radio KKK stations, Augusta Georgia, Punk Police, Howard Beach, Virginia Beach, Bensonhurst, Welfare, South Afrika, and the Racist Bastards of the

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Dedications 4 The Album

First and Foremost I thank the most high ALLAH! I also thank: My Mother, My Sister, Katari, My Aunt & Uncle Tom, Mailing, Jamala, Kenny, Billy, Scott, Keith, Phil, Ayesha, Uncle Bobby, Maurice, Twan, Mutulu, Yafeu, Yasmyn, JADA (my Heart) Sharona (my twin), April, John, Tiff, Mary, Paul, The Bladridge Family, Dana and the Smith Family. Born Busy Posse, The Posse from the Jungle. There R 2 many 2 name here: Koo, Charlie, Gable, Ryan, Pogo, Do Twan, Vernon, Paris, Kendrick, T.C., TR Fi Fi. My Home girls from the Jungle: Yanea, Shiela, Taraja, Danielle, Lena (The High Roller) Blicker, Shona, Hiroji, Liza, Molly, Stacy, Penna, Cosima, The Posse from Rosa: Liela, Bruce U were my family in my need 4 one. Strictly D.O.P.E. we learned T.M.S. Peace: Lance Vince, Michelle, Georgia, Peace 2 the Panther Power Posse: Yak Loc, Asania, Ifey, Kristen, Renee, K.D., Elson, Ally Al, Mel, Kelly, Spelman, Morehouse, AU, Upward Bound and the whole Pantha' Power Posse, KMT, ASD, Nation of Islam, Watani, A-K, Kokayi, Mutulu, Geronimo & the Political prisoners of Amerikkka. Peace 2 my inspirations in the rap world. The old school u made it possible, Rakim, KANE, Chuck-D, KRS ONE, Ice-T, Latifah, Monie Love, JB's, N.W.A, D.O.C., Sinead O'Connor, Prince, Lyte, Sting, Peter Gabriel, Tracey Chapman, SADE, 3rd Bass, Last Poets, Gil Scott Heron, James Brown, Farakahn, Malcom, Jesse, N.A.P.O. Digital Underground, Too Short, Bad Company, O.N.E. Peace 2 the start of it all the womb of the Mother and the soul of the father with the Blessings of Allah. Pantha' Power—FREE THE LAND!!!!!!

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My Mother (Afeni Shakur), My sister (Sekiywa Shakur), My Aunt Jean, Uncle Tommy, Katari, Mailing, Jamala, Kenny, Phillip, Kieth, Scott, Billy, Gregg, Ayesha, Little Rhamen!, Durrell, David, Reggie, Walton Avenue Posse, Shelly, Mikki, & the rest of the Posse even u Kym. Carmen Junior, Dana Smith, Darren Bastfield, Gerard, Roger & Yvette, Jada, Kelli, and all my friends at Baltimore School of the Arts. 2 my eternal friend John Cole! Tiffy Tre, Marsha, Myra, Les, my fantasy, Susie, Piper, Nikki. Cator Avenue Posse. Tamalpais High School Posse. Jungle Posse. There r 2 many 2 write out. Demetrius Ant Dog. Gable and the O.N.E. Posse Jay & Ryan D, Dikky Dane, Puncho, Charlie & the T.C. Posse. Kendrick $! Wells, Molly, Liza, Penna, Staci, Chrissy, & my buddies in L.A. Carlota got a lot a! Little Danny Posse in Santa Rosa 2 much 2 name the T.M.S. Posse Rules! My Atlanta crew Kristin, Calinda, Rachel & the whole Spellman Posse. K.D., Steve, Akinyele, Amanda, Watani, Ahadi, & The New Afrikan Panthers (True Posse!) Yak, LOC, Asania. Liela + Bruce + Mrs. Derado.

In Memory of
Darren Snoop Barrett
John Greene
Damon Barrett
Huey P. Newton
Lumumba Shakur
(My pops) Kenneth Saunders

4 Inspiration I thank the teachers: Rakim, Public Enemy, KRS ONE, Big Daddy Kane & a Special hello 2 the following artists. M. C. Lyte, Latifah, EPMD, N.W.A., D.O.C., Sugga & Spice, Def Jef, Too Short Heavy-D, Digital Underground, Kool Daddy Moe, Prophecy, Slick Rick, Stetsasonic, Fresh Prince, 3x Dope, Prince, James Brown, Ice T, M.C. Hammer, Peace 2 the Nation of Islam and the 5 Percent Nation, Bob Marley, L.L. Cool Jay, all praises due 2 Allah! The most high!

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Thanks 2 my mother Afeni, my sista Sekyiwa, my Aunt Glo & Uncle Tom, Yaz, Louisa, Helena, Gwen, DiDi, Mike Cooley, Red, Mon, Trina, Stretch & Family, Aunt Sharon, Uncle Bobby & Family, Mouse & Family, Nia & Tangaray, my nieces, Elijah, Cresha, Malcolm, Katari, Yak, I look 2 u 4 the future, Moe, Stay Up. My role models Mike Tyson, Mutulu Shakur, Geronimo Pratt

Fred Hampton & every black man that Persists to prevail
Thanks 2 Baltimore school 4 the arts
Ernie McClintock
2 all the true rappers & friends I haven’t forgotten U
Thanx 4 the support!!! 2Pac

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12. 2 all Young Black Males: They let me C 21 but I doubt if I C 25. Be careful. My music is for all of us who were born with the burden of Blackness. Fuck it! It’s a Black thang! C U in Ghetto Heaven

    2PACALYPSE
    Now & Forever

13. Special dedication 2 the youth of Amerikkka & Jacia from D.C.

    Get well & come work 4 me!
    We gonna
    Need some sunshine <3!! Keep ya Head Up!

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Thanks to my family: My mother, my sista', my brotha, Aunt Jean, Uncle Tommy, and all my cousins. Thanks 4 believing in me. Peace 2 my Partners and all my friends I shouldn't have 2 name them all, u know who u r.
A Crazy shout out 2 my Tour Posse: Kane, Scoop Scrap, Monie, My sista Latifah, Mandie, Swatch, Kika, ED, Jayne, A.D., Mark, Latee, Lakim, Apache, Treach (My Ace Womb Partner) New Style, Double Jay, Jian, Chill Rob, Devine, Unique, Stranger, The flavor unit, the 3rd Bass Posse, Heavy D (Thanks 4 the help!) the whole MT Vernon "Boyz" Posse, the Afros, Ice Cube (I owe you a fat Burga') Yo-Yo (A true sista!) Jay Dee, Del Dazzle, T-bone cuz them Lench Mob Niggas R the Craziest. The Motherfuckin' ghetto boyz, Wave, Chuck, Flav, the drew and my new found P.E. family (2Pac is now down with the P.E.) G-Street, Kwame, Peeka, A Sharp, Tat money, Tasha (Smile) Kid-N-Play, Digga, Dre, Hurby, Silk, Leather, Diamond D, Extra Peace 2 the Underground Posse, Mone, Money B, Gray, Mike & 13th Street Posse, Collen, Andrea, Terminator X, Strictly Dope, Ryan D, Charley Mac, Koo Dog, The Jungle, Tribe Called Quest, The Jungle Bros.
[Left margin] Molly, Twan, Liza, Kendrick, Pogo, Playa Playa Mark, Edison, Danka, Lena, J-Bo, Ant Dog, D.J., Gable
Peace 2 my Home New York and Peace 2 my home away from home Cali!

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